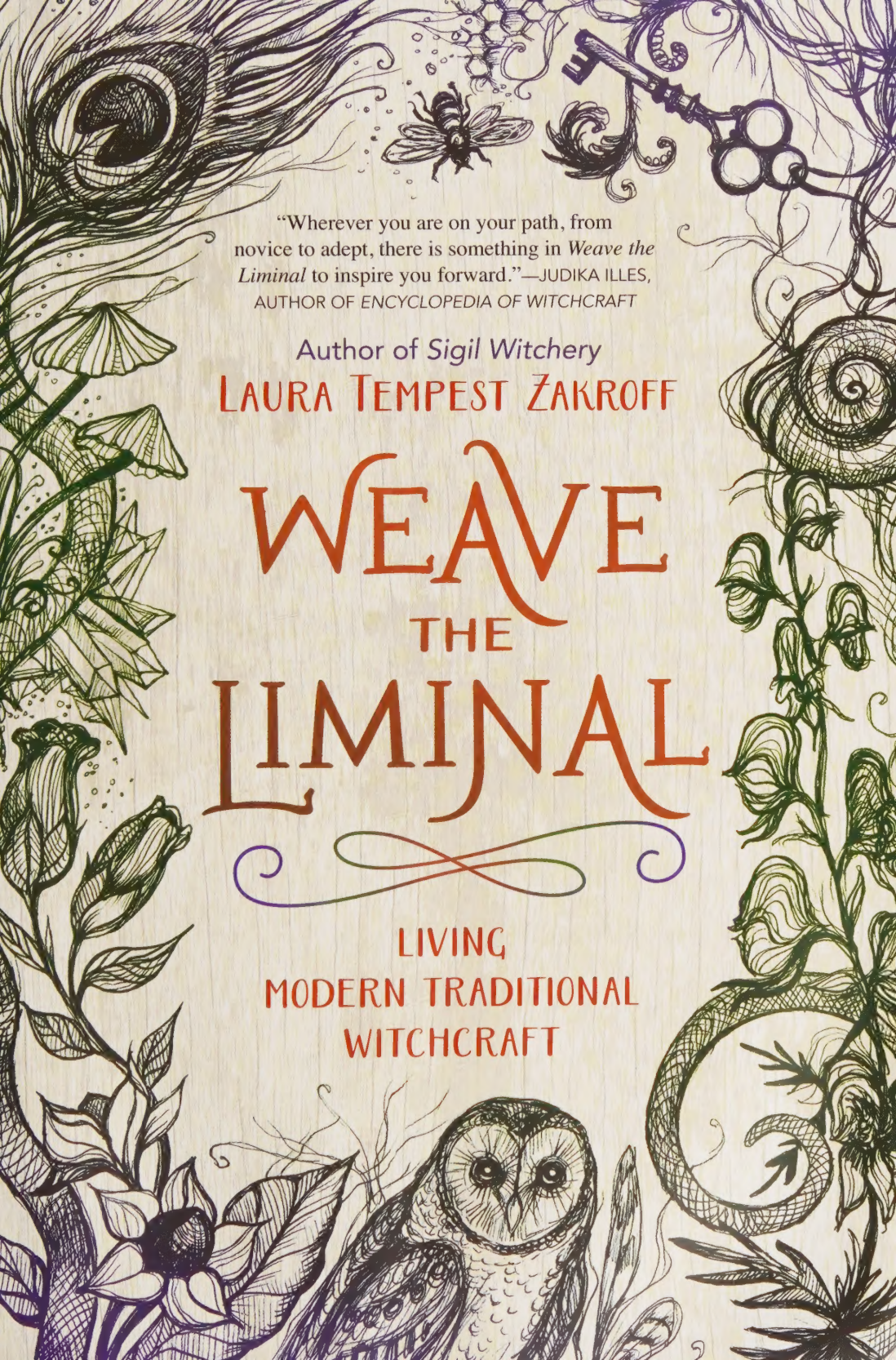

"Wherever you are on your path, from novice to adept, there is something in *Weave the Liminal* to inspire you forward."—JUDIKA ILLES, AUTHOR OF *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WITCHCRAFT*

Author of *Sigil Witchery*

LAURA TEMPEST ŻAKROFF

# WEAVE THE LIMINAL

## LIVING MODERN TRADITIONAL WITCHCRAFT

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## Praise for *Weave the Liminal*

"Laura Tempest Zakroff gathers all the important threads together to weave her guide for modern Witches walking the traditional path. The balance and interweaving of the two is no easy task, but she shows how the modern and traditional really go hand in hand through her teachings. Tempest deftly moves between basic concepts often assumed by authors to some pretty deep philosophical musings, all with the eye to put it into practice and to live the life of the Witch!"

—Christopher Penczak, author of *The Inner Temple of Witchcraft* and *The Mighty Dead*

"All those who practice the Craft in the twenty-first century are, by definition, modern witches, regardless of how closely to a tradition we hew. In *Weave the Liminal*, her beautiful new book, Laura Tempest Zakroff lovingly explores this paradox and shares her hard-won wisdom on how to be your own best possible modern witch. Wherever you are on your path, from novice to adept, there is something in *Weave the Liminal* to inspire you forward."

—Judika Illes, author of *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft* and *Encyclopedia of 5,000 Spells*

"Laura Tempest Zakroff's *Weave the Liminal* has done something for modern Witchcraft: she has made Witchcraft accessible to beginners in a way that will change generations. You'll be recommending this book for decades to come."

—Amy Blackthorn, author of *Blackthorn's Botanical Magic*

"Beautiful, powerful, and delightful—a rare and piercing combination that instructs and inspires. *Weave the Liminal: Living Modern Traditional Witchcraft* is a garden of very earthly treats. The wit and brightness of this book cannot be overstated. The illustrations are beguiling, but the meat of the piece is the way Zakroff crafts her Craft. Enjoy this, revel in it, learn from it."

—H. Byron Ballard, author of *Earth Works: Ceremonies in Tower Time*

"This book contains a lot of information that feels like putting on your favorite sweater, comfy and familiar. Just the same, there is a lot within it that also feels like running around in the woods at night, exhilarating and inspiring. Tempest's approach to Witchcraft is practical and realistic but enchanting and mystical at the same time."

—Kelden, author of the Patheos blog *By Athame and Stang*

"Every Witch needs to read this book several times over; this is a comprehensive guide to Modern Witchcraft and the vast liminal spaces that exist within the tradition. Laura shatters the black-white, good-evil dichotomy we are so used to. Full of otherworldly wisdom, practical advice and real-life applications, this book grants its reader permission to exist outside the box, take up space without apology, and dare to break the mold. Laura delivers a rare book you didn't know you needed until its words seep into your psyche; then it turns into a life-changing experience. She proves that Witches are weavers of reality and rebellion."

—Jaclyn Cherie, creatrix of *The Nephilim Rising*

"In *Weave the Liminal*, Laura Tempest Zakroff offers a personal and unique approach to what it means to practice witchcraft as a Modern Traditional Witch. She moves the reader into weaving their own practice through stories, insight, and anecdotes drawn from her own life and experiences without the use of formal ritual, spells, recipes, and exercises or by relying on the fragile validity of lineage. *Weave the Liminal* is definitely where witches both new and old, novice and seasoned, are sure to find commonality as they make their way into what it means to practice witchcraft in the twenty-first century."

—Christopher Orapello, podcaster, artist, and coauthor of *Besom, Stang & Sword*

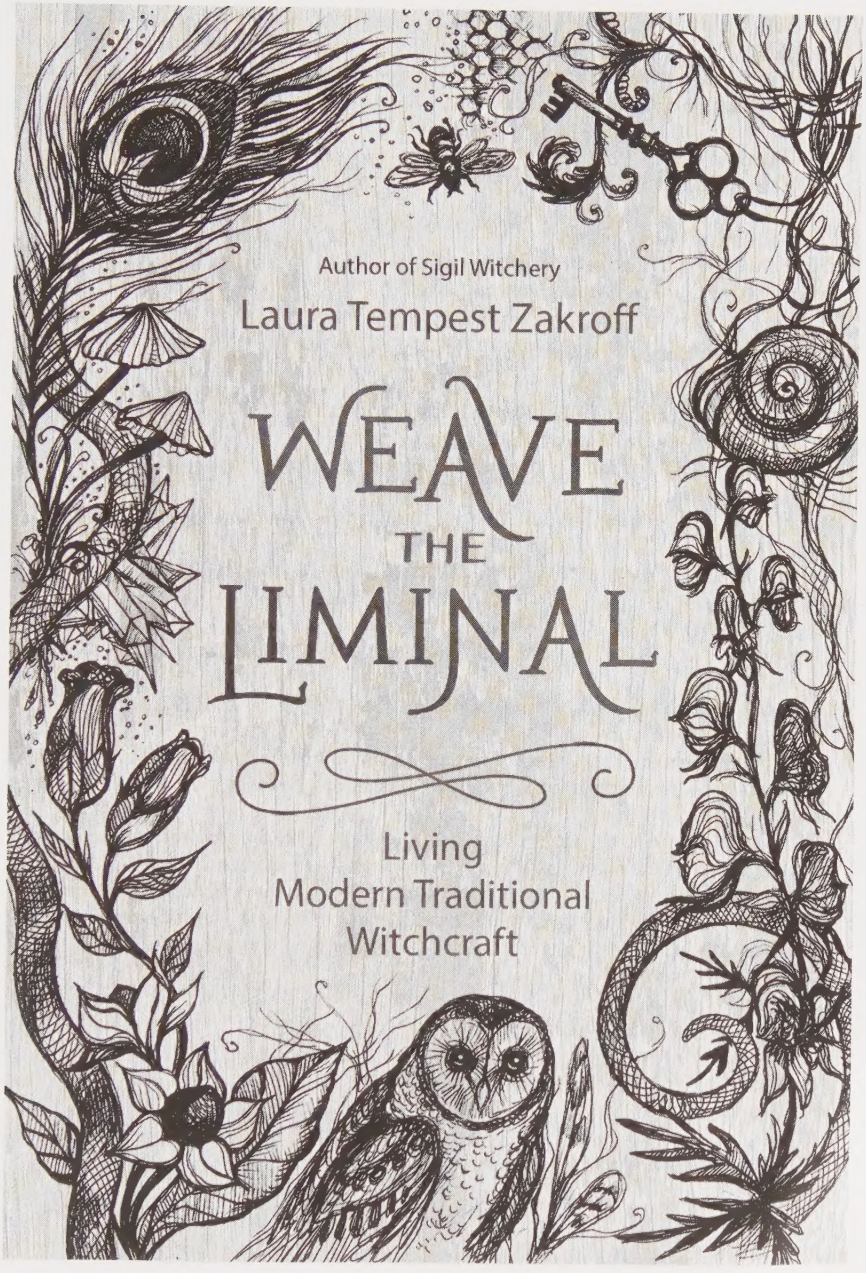
"Leaving no stone unturned, Laura Tempest Zakroff offers a thorough and deeply personal deconstruction, examination, and reappraisal of the modern witch's Craft, and carefully guides the reader through the warp and weft of crafting a path that is truly the witch's own."

—Gemma Gary, author of *Traditional Witchcraft: A Cornish Book of Ways*, *The Black Toad*, and *The Devil's Dozen*

# WEAVE THE LIMINAL

## About the Author

Laura Tempest Zakroff is a professional artist, author, dancer, designer, and Modern Traditional Witch. She holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, and her myth-inspired artwork has received awards and honors worldwide. Laura blogs for Patheos as *A Modern Traditional Witch* and for Witches & Pagans as *Fine Art Witchery* and contributes to *The Witches' Almanac*. She is the author of the bestselling book *Sigil Witchery: A Witch's Guide to Crafting Magick Symbols* as well as *The Witch's Cauldron: The Craft, Lore & Magick of Ritual Vessels* and *The Witch's Altar: The Craft, Lore & Magick of Sacred Space*. Laura edited *The New Aradia: A Witch's Handbook to Magical Resistance* from Revelore Press. Find out more at www.lauratempestzakroff.com.




Llewellyn Publications
Woodbury, Minnesota

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First Edition
Third Printing, 2019

Cover design by Shira Atakpu
Cover illustration by Laura Tempest Zakroff
Interior illustrations by Laura Tempest Zakroff

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Names: Zakroff, Laura Tempest, author.
Title: Weave the liminal : living modern traditional witchcraft / by Laura Tempest Zakroff.
Description: First edition. | Woodbury, Minnesota : Llewellyn Worldwide, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018044217 (print) | LCCN 2018049177 (ebook) | ISBN 9780738756189 (ebook) | ISBN 9780738756103 (alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Witchcraft. | Witches.
Classification: LCC BF1571 (ebook) | LCC BF1571 .Z35 2019 (print) | DDC 133.4/3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018044217

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Llewellyn Publications
A Division of Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125-2989
www.llewellyn.com

Printed in the United States of America

## Other Works by Laura Tempest Zakroff

### *Books*

*The Witch's Altar* (with Jason Mankey)
(Llewellyn, 2018)

*Sigil Witchery*
(Llewellyn, 2018)

*The Witch's Cauldron*
(Llewellyn, 2017)

*The New Aradia: A Witch's Handbook to Magical Resistance*
(Editor, Revelore, 2018)

### *Coloring Books*

*Myth & Magick* (2016)

*The Art of Bellydance* (2016)

*Witch's Brew* (2016)

*Steampunk Menagerie* (2015)

### *Instructional DVDs*

*DecoDance* (2015)

*Bellydance Artistry* (2011)

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*Llewellyn's 2019 Witches' Spell-a-Day Almanac*
(Artist, Llewellyn, 2019)

*Witches & Pagans* and *SageWoman* magazines
(Illustrator, BBI Media)

*The Witches' Almanac, Spring 2017–2018, 2018–2019, 2019–2020*
(Contributing author, The Witches' Almanac, LTD)

*The Witch's Book of Shadows* by Jason Mankey
(Contributing author, Llewellyn, 2017)

*To Nathaniel,*
*my partner in living and weaving this amazing life.*

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# Foreword by Ivo Dominguez Jr.

I have been active in the Wiccan and Pagan community for a bit more than four decades, and I am always looking for those who are coming up to bear the torches, plant the seeds, and craft our cultures. Laura Tempest Zakroff enchanted me with arcane sigils, aether-quaking dance moves, and a fine laugh—actually a cackle. I read her blog, admired her art, and encountered her in person to read her energy, and she did not disappoint. In fact, I invited her to teach at the Seelie Court, the Assembly of the Sacred Wheel's land, and encouraged my students to follow her work. Our styles of practice are wildly different from each other except in the thing that matters most to me. She encourages questions, creativity, confidence, and rigorous attention to letting go.

Since you have opened this book, a new magick has begun. Your expectations, anticipations, and hopes for what this book might bring are being combined with the author's words. Page by page the book will be recreated in your mind as a new weaving, a patchwork quilt, of interconnected thoughts, or perhaps as a new garment cut from the pattern of the book. This always happens, and every book becomes different in every reader's hand. The difference with *Weave the Liminal* is that I believe it is the author's fond hope that your creative flow will remake the book to truly suit you.

In my tradition, when beloveds pledge to each other in a hand-fasting, a wedding, they are declared to be neither bound nor free as the

cords are removed from their wrists. This is a statement about the beautiful and challenging nature of their love, life events, and free will winding and twisting a path through time in a way that blurs what is cause and what is effect. *Weave the Liminal* is also a statement about the beautiful and complicated relationship a witch has with their path. Often, relationships are where life lessons are learned, karma is unfolded, and the soul is polished or tarnished. Much the same can be said about the relationship between a witch and their path. This book is about learning limits and knowing when to bend, push, or stretch them.

Not everything is as it appears. The tone of the book may be light when the topic is filled with deep currents and undertows. Dramatic words may help to highlight what may seem obvious or lighthearted. It is a very enjoyable read, but don't underestimate how many layers are present just because you are amused. The Muses can kick you from one end of the universe to the other while keeping you entertained.

This book is about examining the science, craft, and art of being a witch. It beautifully examines the sacred union of the modern with the traditional, the emerging and the established. A seasoned practitioner such as myself can learn as much from this book as a newly awakened witch because it explores dynamics that are perennial. I look forward to seeing how the landscape of witchcraft will be changed over the years by this book. Turn the page if you will. It is time to start.

Blessings,

Ivo

**Ivo Dominguez Jr.** is an Elder in the Assembly of the Sacred Wheel and is an author, astrologer, and ritualist. His latest book is *Keys to Perception: A Practical Guide to Psychic Development*. Visit www.ivodominguezjr.com.

# Introduction

*You walk through a set of heavy, dark blue velvet curtains into a mostly darkened room that feels both expansive yet oddly cozy. There is an aroma of old wood and earth, with a whisper of musk, spice, and incense. In the center of the room, a window high above lets in a shaft of light, and you can see dust motes dancing within it. The ray illuminates an enormous old loom that dominates the space. As you walk closer, you can see the numerous evenly set, strong warp threads that make up the base structure of the fabric in progress. Running perpendicular to the warp, you see hundreds—possibly thousands—of colorful threads weaving in and out. They interlock, contrasting and complementing the other threads around them. You see that each tiny colorful thread has a label with a name, time, and place. With a bit of surprise, you find one with your own name on it! The threads nearby bear many familiar names as well, but you can't quite make out the pattern. Stepping back from the loom, a motif slowly becomes visible to you …*

In the Modern Tradition of Witchcraft, we often refer to ourselves as weavers: active participants in working the fabric that makes up the pattern of life. We recognize the interconnectivity of all things: people, places, animals, and plants, past, present, and future. We are all just a few threads apart, residing in layers of space and time that are immensely vast yet also more intimate than we could ever imagine. We are simultaneously the weavers *and* the woven. We influence the weaving of our threads and those around us through both physical and metaphysical

work. The pattern is devised from a sense of where we've been and directed by where we hope to go.

The Modern Tradition builds upon the roots of the past while paying careful attention to the present world around us, with an eye fixed on the future. In order to achieve this view, we embrace the backbone of the warp while remaining flexible with the constantly weaving threads in many concrete ways. Unlike most traditions and similar mystery paths, the Modern Tradition eschews a hierarchical system—there are no degrees, no certificates, no titles of power. There is no set timeline, no arbitrary system to mark progression. The seeker follows their own path and practices self-discipline at their own pace for an ever-growing journey. Nor is the Modern Tradition specific to one culture or one pantheon, but instead is designed to work for where you live and who you are. The goal is to create an authentic path of Witchcraft that works for *you*.

No matter which culture you look at, or the variation in label, the Witch has played a similar role in all of them. The Witch is the walker between the worlds, the one who resides on the outskirts, the keeper of mysteries, the righter of ways. The Witch heals, banishes, cleanses, burns, divines, speaks, communes. The Witch is a practitioner, not a participant. The Witch is spiritual, but not necessarily of an organized religion. The role of the Witch is one rooted in vocation, with an understanding of commerce—of give-and-take, an exchange of energies and tokens. The Witch may walk a solitary path, but that does not mean the Witch walks alone. The Witch is immersed in the environment around them, noting and making use of what's available, creating solutions in the moment. The Witch knows the folklore and the old ways but embraces opportunity and change as they are presented to enhance their practice.

To embrace being a Witch in the modern era is to recognize all of these parts and seek to incorporate their relevance into today's society. For example, we may originate in one land or place, but we may live in a completely different area. It's one thing to practice the folklore of a certain place when you live there, but once you reside or live in a new location, your practice must change to reflect the nature of that land.

Or what if your blood calls to one place and your spirit to another? Must you deny one for the other because it's the most seemingly logical or accepted choice, or do you follow your instincts? How can you embrace tradition while living in the modern age?

As you may gather, the Modern Traditional Witch is not a follower. Instead, they are a pioneer of their own path. It is not an eclectic path, but rather a curated one, requiring you to consider and choose the elements carefully that define and make up your personal practice. You are allowed and encouraged to experiment in a responsible manner to find out what works best for you. This flexibility is what makes a Witchcraft practice authentic and real.

Together we will look at the history and structure of the Modern Tradition. We will explore deeply what it truly means to be a Witch and tackle some hotly contested issues that can be problematic in defining your path. Then we'll see how the five areas that make up RITES (Roots, Inspiration, Time, Environment, Star) can be used as a guide for formulating a working practice. Following that, we'll delve into spellcraft, metaphysics, ritual, and other forms of the Witch's work. We'll journey into the liminal realm and meet with divinity and spirits. Afterward, we'll come back to this world to address the challenges that come with being a modern Witch. Lastly, I have included some resources for you to use and build upon.

I suspect that a fair number of people reading this book have explored other paths, so you may be seeking to focus in on how to forge your own path. You are spiraling inward in a sense, but that doesn't mean your overall motion ever ceases. There is no endpoint; you will simply continue to refine your evolution and explore new ideas along the way.

For some folks, this may be one of the first books on Witchcraft you have ever picked up. There's a good chance that means you are just starting out, with this book being near your point of origin. You are just starting to spiral out, to expand your horizons—which are limitless. Don't be afraid to explore other avenues and approaches.

There are no restrictions on labels or paths to explore, because they can all add perspective and fascinate your mind. You may find that this

book gives you the feeling of putting on the most familiar and comfortable coat you never even knew you had. Keep in mind that choosing to explore a tradition or technique to find out if it's a good fit for you can be extremely helpful as well. As long as you are sincerely interested in learning and growing, you're doing great. No tradition or path is better or more powerful or more right than another. The thing that is most important is finding the best fit for *you*.

Blessings on your journey! May the star illuminate the path before you, and may the darkness hold you close.

### My Witchcraft Is...

My Witchcraft is messy, unable to be contained in pristine, neat rows and tidy jars. But it has a precise pattern, an order woven unto itself.

My Witchcraft lives within the hum of the bones of a city. It also dwells in the decaying depths of the forests.

My Witchcraft is rooted in memories, myths, and stories. Yet I am ever looking toward the folklore of the future. My Witchcraft talks to gods in many forms.

However, the magick depends not on the gods to function.

My Witchcraft speaks to connections between beings. Its roots curl within the wild of my own heart.

My Witchcraft is a gathering of spirits. The Witch always walks alone.

My Witchcraft dances in circles. Witchery knows no borders, edges, or bounding lines.

My Witchcraft chants, sings, cries, screams, moans, and whispers. And it revels in listening to perfect silence.

My Witchcraft is a science of fur and bones, rocks and feathers, blood and flowers. Its makeup is a mystery of metal and circuits, electricity upon concrete.

My Witchcraft curates a collection of parts, bits, pieces, and ephemera. Yet its practice requires nothing of the physical to do its work.

My Witchcraft is a honed skill, a craft, an art, a vocation, and a practice. It is born within: natural, metaphysical, and spiritual.

My Witchcraft is a weathered and worn tableau of lines and marks, sigils, and symbols. It is also a blank and empty page: new, fresh, open, and waiting.

My Witchcraft is my thumbprint upon the world. My Witchcraft is my own.

## Warning: The Following Is Not Your Typical Book on Witchcraft

This is not a book of spells. There are no quick fixes for your love life, easy money spells, or hexes for old flames who have pissed you off.

But we will look at how magick works and how to use it effectively.

There are no wild claims about ancient traditions passed down in an unbroken line for countless generations in an attempt to sound more real or authentic.

But you will be given the tools for how to create a path that works for you in a very real way.

This book does not include a premade set of anything or any spoon-fed constructs and is not designed to sell you a school or system.

It's a bit more like furniture from IKEA that you have to assemble yourself, but with better instructions and metaphysical tools—and, well, the furniture is essentially you.

This book couldn't care less about trying to sound like a mysterious esoteric grimoire from a previous century or a radical and edgy occult riot.

Instead, its goal is to approach the metaphysical practically, in an accessible way that you can make immediate use of.

You will not be a Witch by the time you're done reading this book.

*Chances are you're already one, and you'll understand more about what that means to you by the end.*

**True wisdom is expressed not by seeing how complex you can make the material but by how well you are able to make it accessible for others to grasp.**

# 1

# The History of the Modern Tradition of Witchcraft

*At the Loom:* In order for us to be amazing weavers, we first must understand the history of how such things came to be.

*Liminally Minded:* To find the space in between, we need to see where we have been and feel where we are going.

Every tradition starts in the present, becomes part of the past, and sees itself change and morph into the future. In walking the path of the Modern Traditional Witch, searching for origins can be like following an ouroboros—the serpent that consumes itself endlessly in a circle, all the while shedding old skins to reveal new ones beneath. To uncover the history of the Modern Tradition as well as its present applications and future possibilities for you, we need to wade through some of the skins of my own path.

## In the Beginning

I often joke that I need to work on my Witch origin story. Almost every time I am interviewed, I get asked, "How did you get started in Witchcraft?" My brain instantly spins out in twenty directions, correlating all the various threads that have led me here to this moment. It's practically impossible to narrow it down to a short and sweet narrative, which is probably what people are expecting when they ask that question. I feel they're looking for something like, "I had this mystical experience in the woods with a birch tree when I was fourteen. It spoke and revealed to me

that I was truly a Witch." Or maybe, "When I was eight, my aunt gave me a special book and initiated me into a secret order that only a few people in our family know about. Then we made cookies." Or even something simple like, "One day my best friend gave me a book on Witchcraft, and the rest was history." (Note: These are all examples I made up right now.)

I seriously doubt that many Witches have a short and sweet origin story. It tends to be more of a collective rainstorm of clues drenching you versus coming across a single magical wellspring. You might remember one specific moment of revelation, but then that one leads you to another and another, going further back in your history. Sure, there may have been that one book or person you met that seemed like a starting point. But when you think back more deeply, there was that weird experience you had in the old house, a prophetic dream, a resistance to certain doctrines, a kinship with a certain story or piece of artwork you couldn't explain, and so on. I feel like I came to Witchcraft through the back door—but is there really any other way?

I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't interested in mystical and mysterious things, metaphysical powers, and the occult. Growing up, I spent a lot of time out in nature having conversations with plants, trees, animals, and other things. When I was about three or four, my father and grandfather built a playhouse in our backyard for me. It was more like a little house or cabin—made of solid wood, with a foundation, proper roofing, two windows (with screens), and a Dutch door. My older brothers (seven and nine years my senior) didn't really want to play with me, so I entertained myself by collecting seeds, flowers, leaves, moss, mushrooms, and sticks, and making things from them. I was familiar with every tree and bush in our yard, and most of the animals that traveled through it—bugs, birds, rabbits, and more.

But my interests went beyond our backyard, and particularly to the library, media, and wherever I went with my family. I enthusiastically studied ancient cultures from around the world, fascinated by their myths, art, and religions. I loved watching shows like *In Search Of* and checking out Time-Life's *Mysteries of the Unknown* series of books from the library. My friends and I would test out our psychic abilities with flashcards and similar games. I was intrigued by the saints and spiritual

mysteries of the Catholic Church but bristled against the patriarchal structure and rules. To offset my agitation and boredom with attending mass, I studied the art, ritual tools, and architecture of every church we went to. On my own, I read the more fascinating parts of the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, looking up the stories of Esther, Judith, and Ruth, and around sixth grade I read the book of Revelation for fun (it wasn't).

As I grew older, I fell into reading a lot of fiction and nonfiction about prehistoric societies all the way up to pre-Christian Europe, from Jane Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear* to *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. Throughout all of it, I noticed interesting patterns and made note of weird things that happened to and around me, but I maintained a fair amount of skepticism—and I still do. I knew I saw things differently, but I didn't really have a word for it until I read Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*. Sure, my family often referred to me in jest as "the little heathen" and "the pagan," but the meaning of those words didn't fully register with me at the time. To my family, "pagan" and "heathen" referred to being a nonbeliever in a negative, derogatory context versus a follower of other "valid" ways. And "witch"—well, that went along with being wicked or evil!

Suddenly these words had new meaning and context, opening up a whole new world for me. To find out that there were other people who saw the world as I did, to connect with nature, spirits, and metaphysics, was exhilarating. Yet now that I knew what to look for, I wasn't exactly finding the home I imagined in the books I saw on the shelves. I wasn't attracted to the whimsical-looking and sounding new books on Wicca, and sought to go further back. I studied in depth the development of Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century—all of the different cultlike movements leading up to it: mesmerism, Swedenborgism, Quakers, etc. Combined with my studies in fine art, I delved into Theosophy, the Golden Dawn, Freemasonry, Crowley, and Agrippa, as well as modern feminist works. I researched the history of the Burning Times and read popular source materials: *The White Goddess, The Golden Bough, Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition,* the *Malleus Maleficarum,* and *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches.* I dove deeper into folklore and myth. I read

the works of Gerald Gardner, Dion Fortune, Janet and Stewart Farrar, Marian Green, Doreen Valiente, and many, many others. Out of all of them, it was Doreen's work that struck the closest to my heart.

You see, I love reading different perspectives and particularly enjoy the hunt for information. But for my personal practice, it was hard finding one path or tradition that resonated. I found I have an aversion to ceremonial magic, trouble with power pyramids, and no tolerance for ego massaging or misogyny, so that cut out certain paths. Then there were the folks obsessed with recreating or reconstructing the past. Rediscovering ancient things is cool, but the question is: Does the practice work or can it be applied practically now? Can it work effectively outside of its original location or time period? I live in the United States and come from a long line of people who like to sleep with people from other cultures, so I couldn't follow just one path from one place. Most importantly, I asked, if we're living in the here and now, what makes the most amount of sense for the modern-day practitioner?

Discovering Witchcraft and modern Neo-Paganism was like landing on a mythical island I didn't even know existed. Suddenly I wasn't alone! But upon landing, I was having a heck of a time trying to find people who spoke my language. Not that I was going to let that slow me down—at all.

## Founding a Tradition

On January 2, 2000, three cloaked figures gathered at dusk in the winter-kissed woods of Rhode Island. The circle was hidden from view by leafless branches of trees and bramble bushes by the edge of a lake. Despite the cold temperature, the air was still within the space where they gathered, the snow hushing the world around them. The glow of a few small candles seemed to radiate heat beyond their normal capability, warming up bodies. The three met to consecrate each other and to formalize a path that had started more than three years prior. That night, they became Labyrinth House of the Modern Tradition. Four months later, one of the initial three would gather with five others to form the second formal group, the House of Annwyn. Over the course of the next two years, the House of Annwyn doubled in size and continued on from there.

As you have probably guessed, I was one of the three cloaked figures. The formalizing of the Labyrinth House happened at such a weird time of year because while two of us lived in Rhode Island, the third, known as "Sojenice," had moved to the Bay Area in California. She was back in town visiting, so we took the opportunity to formally ritualize what we had already set in motion. We had met during our time at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), three young women artists with overlapping common threads. We each came from converging backgrounds: Slavic, Celtic, and Mediterranean mingling with other roots in such a way that no one place felt like home in a neat and tidy package. We were raised Christian but knew early on that it wasn't for us—we each felt a calling for a spiritual vocation beyond the framework allowed by that belief system. Through our artwork and writing, we found the divine feminine in the world around us—and in ourselves. Together we brought together formal training in other traditions of Witchcraft, independent occult study with esteemed mentors, family practices, open-path group workings, and self-guided education. We were deeply inspired by ancient myths and felt most aligned with the unfettered, organic-feeling, no-nonsense practices of folkloric Witchery. We didn't find one path already out there that fit us, so we worked to create our own.

I didn't exactly say to myself, "I'm going to found a new tradition of Witchcraft," but I didn't *not* think that either. I had a lot of enthusiasm and energy back then, so the idea that I could start something new didn't seem far-fetched. I had similar thoughts about bringing forth a new style of dance as well. After much searching for what ignites your heart, you perceive a void, and so you seek to create something to fill it. But you can't just sit down and create a new tradition or style of *anything* overnight. You can't lay it all out completely in advance like a game with precise rules—even games take time to evolve. To develop a working system takes trial and error, noting what is effective and isn't, and being open to experimenting as well. When you start involving multiple people, places, deities, and spirits, that adds more factors and viewpoints to consider. There are more threads to weave, and new patterns start emerging.

When I encountered Sojenice in 1997, I had essentially been on my own trying to figure out my path for several years. I had corresponded with other folks online via IRC chatrooms, online forums, and email, but I had yet to meet another practicing Witch in person. Sojenice was studying with Rosegate, an officially registered church of Witchcraft in Rhode Island that was a blend of family tradition, Wicca, and Rosicrucian systems. When I moved to Providence myself, I discovered another group that I was interested in: the Society of the Evening Star, associated with the N.E.C.T.W. (New England Coven of Traditionalist Witches). Unfortunately, and to be brutally honest, the marriage that I was in at the time didn't give me a lot of freedom to explore that option or many others that he couldn't keep tabs on.[1] Instead, I tucked away the invitation letter for safekeeping, with a lot of wishful thinking. So when I met Sojenice, it was thrilling to finally talk to someone in person at length about Witchcraft while I was also going to school. (That made it "safe": my school time was my own.)

Sojenice had a project she used to fulfill both a school assignment and work for her tradition degrees that became a beautiful quarterly magazine called *Crescent*. I started to write and create art for it, and through the magazine I met the third person in our equation, "D." D was a recent RISD graduate who followed a solitary path that blended Italian and Celtic practices and wasn't really interested in working with formalized groups or systems. We were united by our common interests in art, Witchcraft, tarot, and mythology. Soon, though, Sojenice graduated and moved to California. The magazine kept on running, but whatever practice we talked about mainly happened via phone, chat, or email, and we did our workings on our own individually.

I was pretty much heartbroken by Sojenice moving home to California. D and I hit it off well, but her own situation didn't allow for a lot of free time to hang out either. I desperately felt the call to meet up with others to talk about Paganism and Witchcraft and to do rituals and workings, so I decided to head over to the Office of Student Life to

1. I could probably write a whole book on surviving under the strain of a narcissistic abuser, but I really don't want to explore that here. I only bring it up because it did play a factor in what paths I was free to explore at that time.

see what it would take to form a Pagan Society. I don't remember the details very well, but it wasn't terribly hard. I reserved a meeting space and put up some fliers around campus, and people actually showed up! We had enough people to officially become a recognized group, which I called the Cauldron of Annwyn Pagan Society. (The Cauldron of Annwyn is said to be a source of inspiration, which fit an art school very well.) Soon we expanded to include Brown University students, following the model of other faith-based campus groups. Then I had students from other nearby colleges contacting me, asking if they could come to meetings because their school didn't have a Pagan Society. Sure! The more the merrier! Next I heard from people who were college age but not in college—could they come too? I couldn't see a reason why not, so they joined too. And, well, what is college age, anyway? So soon the group was open to everyone who was interested in joining. Regular meetings could see at least a couple dozen faces, whereas special rituals and events would attract two to five times that many.

From this large group of people, there were a small handful that I really connected with. I started to teach classes on Witchcraft to this small group. Soon we started to do our own separate rituals and workings outside of the larger open-path Pagan Society. In the meantime, I started a website where I collected my thoughts, practices, and ideas about Witchcraft—called the Modern Tradition of Witchcraft. The website quickly became large and fairly popular because it was an easy-to-read yet in-depth resource for anyone searching to craft a similar path for themselves.

The name "Modern Tradition of Witchcraft" came about because I felt it best explained what we were doing. Sojenice, D, and I had tossed around a few different names without agreeing on one. In the midst of the '90s popularity boom for Witches (largely in thanks to a movie called *The Craft*), there was a lot of discussion online about the differences between Wicca and Witchcraft. There was separation between the main British forms (mainly Gardnerian and Alexandrian), New England traditions, the various new forms of Wicca out in the book market, West Coast systems, and a rise in what currently is called "tradcraft" and hedgewitchery—branches of Witchcraft that may be hereditary/

family in nature and/or non-Wiccan in structure. We felt like a family in structure, lacking a formal degreed hierarchy while having the autonomy to practice on our own. In our practice and beliefs, we most closely resembled folkloric, traditional Witchcraft, but we weren't trying to recreate the old ways or claim some ancient authenticity. We researched our own roots and discussed concepts with each other, but we also recognized that we needed to focus as much on the now—where we were living and what we were dealing with on a daily basis in the modern world. So when I came up with "Modern Traditional," with the option to be more poetic about the naming of individual houses (groups), Sojenice and D were on board. I wouldn't see anyone else using that combination as a naming description for a few more years.

It's still a bit mind-boggling to look back and see how I went from a solitary practitioner, to meeting other like-minded Witches, to forming an open-path Pagan Society, to designing and leading group rituals, to teaching Witchcraft and heading up a tradition. I began studying dance intensely so I could incorporate movement into our practice. I became an associate editor for *Crescent*, was the youngest attendee at the 2001 Pagan Leaders Summit in Bloomington, IN, started the first Rhode Island Pagan Pride Day, and also became the regional coordinator for the Pagan Pride Day Project. Clearly I was inspired and driven and, perhaps some might say, possessed by the spirit.

The thing I wasn't ready for was trying to lead a close-knit group from thousands of miles away. When I finally followed Sojenice to California in late 2001, the House of Annwyn carried on without me. But there was latent resentment over my leaving, and communication didn't always happen smoothly. I couldn't help resolve tensions between members, being so far away. Then life happened, as it does: folks move, someone gets divorced, another gets married, and people follow their own path, focusing on that instead. The House of Annwyn ceased to exist, at least in the way we initially imagined.

My own life shifted and changed as well. Instead of trying to build something similar on the West Coast, I taught general classes on Witchcraft and metaphysics, immersed myself in dance, and got involved with local festivals and events. But as my time in California progressed, I found

myself withdrawing more and more from the larger Pagan community. I started to focus more on dance-related business, eventually resigned from the magazine, and felt burned-out in general across the board.

Feeling the need for a fresh start and to be closer to my family, I moved to New Jersey in 2007. I found new inspiration in the familiar landscape of my childhood and teaching beginning dance classes to a wonderful group of people. Through them, I slowly put a toe back in the Pagan community waters and reconnected with what inspired me to dance in the first place: movement as ritual. But soon there was another move back to Rhode Island, leaving friends and new threads behind. More energy had to be channeled into making ends meet while trying to keep the peace at home. I couldn't reconnect with old threads without facing ridicule from within my own home, so I kept my practice to myself.

Finally, at the fifteen-year mark of the marriage, I summoned the power to end that unhealthy relationship and reclaim my life. I also quit my fancy corporate design job and moved across the country to Seattle. This major shift marked the end of what I call "my previous life." I began making art full-time, entered into a wonderful partnership, and absolutely fell in love with the landscape and energy of the Pacific Northwest. I found myself rekindling friendships I had once considered burned away while fostering amazing new ones. I discovered the energy and excitement to take my practice out of its tucked-away shell and expand on all levels. I also encountered the blessing of being able to collaborate with like-minded folks from a multitude of diverse paths and traditions.

These days I focus on teaching the methods and mindset of Modern Traditional Witchcraft to aid practitioners in developing paths and practices that work for them, versus focusing on a handful of people or small groups. Through workshops, local classes, online classes and study groups, my blog, my website, and now this book, the Modern Tradition can empower a wide variety of people all over the world. I'm not interested in setting up an organized religion, society, or league of followers. I'd rather see folks be invigorated and inspired to walk their own path and respect others.

So while the houses of the Modern Tradition are no longer officially active in a formal sense, something greater was born. Through those

years of experience, concepts were tested, new ideas were explored, and a more fluid system was created that can work for anyone interested in and willing to forge a similar path. The Witch of the Modern Tradition morphed into the more appropriate designation of a Modern Traditional Witch.

## But Modern and Traditional?

Back in the late '90s, I read and participated in a variety of online forums / message boards. There were many that were flooded with 101 questions, spell requests, and fantasy fluff, so it took some work to find ones where serious or more advanced discussion happened. Often you had to fill out a questionnaire to be granted access to the better boards. That was the process for several of the Traditional Witchcraft boards I belonged to. There were some good discussions and sharing of resources, but often the conversation got dominated by pissing contests. Statements like "My way/tradition is better/more correct/more authentic/older than yours" would come up again and again. And there I was with my on-the-table oxymoron: "Why, yes, I'm both modern *and* traditional." I didn't receive too much flak for it, possibly because I was probably ignored by some hotheads who saw me as beneath them due to my age, gender, or chosen labels. But I think a large part of the lack of debate had to do with the fact that I was very upfront about my path, presented myself in a grounded manner, and didn't care much what other people thought.

So why modern and traditional? Because I'm not a genetic pure-blood anything, nor am I living in the twelfth, fifteenth, or nineteenth century or in the "old world." I'm not from one particular ethnic background, so why would I align only with the gods found in a portion of my blood when there are many more talking to me? What if it's not just ethnic heritage that factors in but also past lives—and what if those aren't connected by blood either? What if our ancestors really can and do come to us in dreams and initiate us in the old ways as needed? If our predecessors had the tools we have access to today, would they exchange the flint for the lighter? I think so.

Every day we are not only living proof of past traditions and methods but are also innovating and creating new traditions and ways. To

me, Witchcraft is about doing what needs to be done with what you have available. There are time-honored things we do not just because Grandmom did them but because they *work*—and then there are the new ways we find that work better. Whether the method is ancient or modern isn't important as long as it works. The trick is in understanding how and why these seemingly opposite categories work in balance.

## What Is Traditional?

What is a tradition? What is traditional? I think these are both questions that are not often asked when folks talk about "tradcraft," or Traditional Witchcraft. I've watched an interesting metamorphosis over the last two decades, and there are a wide variety of opinions as to what those two words, when put together, actually mean. Those who identify as Gardnerian or Alexandrian often refer to themselves as BTWs (British Traditional Witches) to differentiate themselves from the eclectic and other forms that became known as Wicca. For some, Traditional Witchcraft refers to non-Wiccan Witchcraft in the belief that it's pre-Gardnerian, lacking the ceremonial magic structure and other formatting typically found within Wicca and essentially differentiating the practice from modern Wicca. Then there are other traditions of Witchcraft, many of which claim to be hereditary or family-based in origin, though being a blood relation is not necessary to join. I have seen countless online forums and discussion threads where people really get their anger on debating what those words mean and who gets to use them, which is essentially time wasted arguing semantics and worrying about what other people think. Who has the time and energy to police and validate other people's paths, especially if they're working for them?

I don't know about you, but I find all of that so exhausting. If your label works for you, great. It's wonderful to explore history, but no amount of academic research is going to prove that there is one definitive tradition of Witchcraft. Humans and culture simply do not work that way.

Traditions are born, acknowledged, and reinvented and fade away into obscurity every day. They are not universal, meaning that if you find a tradition in one place or with one group of people, you won't necessarily find it somewhere else. You might, but considering that traditions

can vary from country to country, town to town, family to family, and generation to generation, we must acknowledge their fluidity. A tradition simply refers to a pattern of action and/or belief that is passed along in some designated way. It could be direct, from generation to generation, or passed along by friends, or it could skip down the line. Recipes, songs, dances, stories, observations of holidays, good luck charms, ways of crafting certain items, formulas for gardening, and secret spots for fishing or vacations are all ways that traditions are transmitted. With the possible exception of recipes and photos, very few things are handed down solely through the passing of books. Even those two examples are generally shared directly, such as cooking alongside the maker and looking through a photo album together. There is a hands-on factor that keeps a tradition living, and it's usually dependent on the relationship we have with the person we're sharing that experience with. You might have certain saints on your altar because your beloved grandmother had them too and taught you how to work with them, but you might avoid doing something you associate with that mean uncle you hated.

We tend to equate "traditional" with things that are old, ancient, or historic, have esteemed value, or were created by great people, but the reality is that traditions are being made every day by regular, ordinary people. Often they are infused with meaning, but sometimes the initial intent and purpose gets lost in a multigenerational game of telephone. Traditions tend to get started because there was a change activated that correlated to a specific event or situation, which probably involved some problem solving. Typically the response to that change was positive and seen as successful, so that belief or action became reinforced and was repeated.

We see this a lot with traditional dishes that have been passed down through generations. My former mother-in-law was originally from London and was old enough to have been there during World War II. She taught her son to make Yorkshire pudding, with a beef roast and gravy. The story that was passed along with this meal was that in lean times you were able to fill up on the spongy bread and sop up the meat gravy with it, thus making more meal out of expensive meat. (It's also ridiculously tasty.) When I visited the UK myself, the story was collabo-

rated by my British companions as we sat down together for a meal at a tavern. Even though I am no longer part of that family, I make my own variation of this meal because over time I came to associate it with comfort food. On the Italian side of my family there are specific traditions involved in the making of "gravy" (spaghetti sauce), pizzelle cookies, and other dishes that are made only at certain times of the year, usually aligning with harvests and religious feasts. Every New Year's Eve I think of my friend Anaar, who is half-Japanese, and her tradition of making a beef and noodle dish on that night. (I also think of her every time I put soy sauce on my white rice because of how disgusting she finds that. I find it deliciously salty.) Really, you could look at any family (even the ones that don't cook) and find traditions regarding food.

Which brings up a very important thing to think about: the only thing consistent about family traditions is that they happen. This fact gets to the diseased heart of many authenticity arguments that state, "That can't be real or authentic because *my* family didn't do that!" What is true for one family may not hold true for another—which invalidates neither. Think of a holiday family dinner. It may be a tradition in your family to have ham, potatoes, and fruit for a certain holiday, but your neighbors may celebrate that very same holiday with something totally different, like lamb, rice, and roasted vegetables. (And now we're all hungry—sorry about that.)

Certain traditional practices get left behind or change because they're no longer functional, safe, available, affordable, culturally/socially acceptable, or able to be reproduced. Others fall out of favor when a new generation tries to break away and the old ways get tossed in the rebellion. But things that work and have meaning are not always lost forever. We can reactivate traditions that were left behind or forgotten, picking up the thread and weaving it anew.

So what does tradition have to do with Witchcraft? Consider the traditional as a means of weaving in the past. We can look to folklore to harness the wisdom of those who came before us. Plant lore, charms, myths, and cultural history can all help us tap into things our ancestors already discovered. We don't always have to reinvent the wheel—especially when the plans have been laid out before us. We can also look to

tradition for inspiration and to give us guidelines on how to use our knowledge effectively and pass it on to future generations. It's much easier to know where we are going if we're familiar with where we have been.

## What Is Modern?

Now that we've tackled traditional, let's take a look at the application of modern. In retrospect, it's rather funny that I selected the word "modern," as I tend not to be enthusiastic about most of the modern art movements, and outside of Martha Graham emerging from the Denishawn dance company (Ruth St. Denis is one of my dance heroes), I have tepid feelings for modern dance as well. But "modern" does pair better with "traditional" than with "contemporary" or "current" or, gods forbid, "neo." The juxtaposition of the words and the sound off the tongue are more effective, in my opinion.

One of the best things about humanity is our ability to problem-solve, to take ideas and build on them, to find new and different ways to interact with the world. Of course those same inquisitive traits can get us in trouble when we move forward without considering the full consequences of our actions. Progress for the sake of progress can in turn set back progress, but for the most part, innovation has moved carefully and positively forward. For instance, we harnessed the power of fire to warm ourselves, cook food, and purify water. Then we learned to work metal so we could go from using animal bladders, shells, and coconuts (carried by African swallows to Europe) to crafting cauldrons to use for cooking, carrying, and cleaning.[2] We could continue down the line with advancements that led to new techniques, from indoor plumbing to electricity. It's natural for us to keep wondering and working—in fact, you can say it's part of human tradition.

Incorporating new ideas into the mix doesn't have to mean tossing out old ones. There has to be a balance. Short of going totally off the grid and running your own island, it would not be easy to disconnect from the world and go back to the way our ancestors lived 200, 500, 1,000, or 5,000 years ago. Our modern world presents new challenges

2. Want to know more about the evolution of cauldrons? I wrote a book on it! *The Witch's Cauldron: The Craft, Lore & Magick of Ritual Vessels* (Llewellyn, 2017).

that our ancestors could never have imagined. That means we must use our ingenuity and be willing to adapt to new ways of doing things when the old ways cease to work. It's important to respect and educate ourselves about the past, but living traditions can't survive under pin and glass. They have to be able to breathe, grow, and change. But at the same time, everything that's new and shiny isn't necessarily better. So it's up to us to find the right mixture of modern and traditional.

What does modern have to do with Witchcraft? Thanks to technology, we are able to find information more quickly, as well as preserve it for ourselves and others in a variety of formats. We can use our modern technology to tap into the past, locate ancient sites, and discover relics that give us insights into the past. With our advanced knowledge, we can utilize materials that are safer and healthier for us and the environment, and have a better understanding of where those materials come from. We are able to connect with others much more easily and share our ideas with people all over the world.

## Keys to the Witch's Path

In order to find the golden mean between past, present, and future, it's helpful to have some goals, or keys, to keep in mind. The symbol of the key reminds us of responsibility and the ability to lock, access, or open a door. Keys invoke a sense of stewardship and connectivity to something larger than ourselves. Their weight is familiar in our hands, and their sound brings us comfort and awareness. Through them, we're able to unlock pieces of ourselves.

The following three keys have been an integral part of the Modern Tradition from the beginning. They provide basic guidelines that allow us to tread carefully into deeper territories.

### *1. Know Thyself*

These words are said to have been inscribed in Greek in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, where the Pythiai (oracular priestesses) did their work. This was one of the 147 Delphic maxims, or aphorisms, whose exact origin is unknown but which were attributed to the Seven Sages of Greece by Joannes Stobaeus, a scholar from the fifth century

CE. These are wise words to consider when journeying to consult the oracle. We often look outside of ourselves for guidance when much of what we need to know is already within us. To know yourself means to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses, mentally, spiritually, and physically. When we are conscious of these things, we can make better choices about what we need to do, how to do it, and who to do it with. Be mindful of your own limitations as well as those of others.

### *2. Maintain Balance*

This key sounds like knowing how to practice moderation, but it also requires understanding extremes and working with them. Sometimes we must take an extreme position or action to correct a situation. Balance is a state of mind, not an exact location. Part of maintaining balance is understanding that every action and intention has possible positive and negative reactions to varying degrees. Whether something is positive or negative (helpful or harmful) has a lot to do with perspective, and we should endeavor to see outside of our own personal spectrum. Is something you're doing helpful or hurtful to yourself or others?

### *3. Accept Responsibility*

With the vision that comes from understanding how to maintain balance, we perceive cause and effect and the implication of our own involvement. Therefore, this key inherently requires us to be willing to accept responsibility for what we do and say. Part of being a Witch is being able to acknowledge, accept, and work with both the known and the unknown consequences of our actions and words. Take into consideration what the outcome of any working could be, beyond your own intentions.

These three keys combined can guide you through many situations you will encounter on your path as a Witch. If you're considering a course of education, knowing what your limits are and what you need to work on can help you make the best choice. When using divination, you can consider how you and/or others will react to a situation and calculate possible outcomes.

With your own idiosyncrasies in mind, you can avoid making common mistakes and steer clear of trouble. You can learn more about the merits of your character and what you are willing to put up with or sacrifice to achieve a desired outcome. With patience, compassion, and understanding in hand, these keys will empower your path and illuminate your way as a Witch.

## Witchcraft Today, from Yesterday to Tomorrow

The Modern Tradition of Witchcraft was founded with the intent of creating a sensible, fluid, and *living* path for the modern Witch. That intent certainly birthed such a way, even if the initial idea of a formal structured tradition didn't exactly stick. The phenomenon of Modern Traditional Witchcraft allows for so much more than what that initial idea could have encompassed. The Modern Traditional Witch doesn't have to follow a specific deity or undergo a secret initiation. They can live and be from anywhere. They don't need a house or a coven to practice with. They find their footing in their own roots, the endless possibilities at their fingertips, and the potential within their hearts and minds.

As we move forward in this book, I want to remind folks that Witchcraft is not for the elite or the elitist. Its roots lay deep within the earth, while its branches break the sky. It requires us to be grounded, practical, and creative all at the same time. Sure, we can geek out over details and wax poetic about esoterica. However, if we forget how to be in the moment, to get dirt under our nails while tasting the wine of our creations, we miss out on the actual practice of Witchcraft. My goal with this book is to inspire, to break down old and outdated ideas, to be practical and metaphysical, spiritual and embodied. There are no secrets or established pinnacles, but only possibilities and opportunities.

# Who or What Is a Witch?

*At the Loom:* Feel the smooth wood of the ancient loom and smell its aroma, worn and oiled by many hands, greased by sweat and blood.

*Liminally Minded:* The voices of the liminal speak in rumbling images, resonating deep within the core of our being.

The Witch is an archetype, a character of many faces and descriptions influenced by time and culture. In order to understand who is the Witch and what it means to be one, we will define the word and delve through history. We'll consider where the Witch originated, the nuances of becoming one, and the array of factors involved in choosing this word and this path.

## Defining *Witch*

In order to talk about who or what is a Witch, and what it means to be one, I think it's important to consider how the word Witch is often defined, as well as its various interpretations. At first, Witch may seem like an easy word to define, but it's not unlike a rat's nest, covered in layers of debris. There are a lot of different theories about the origins of the word, and there is even more cultural baggage associated with it. Let's start untangling it by starting with the most common outside views. If we look in any basic dictionary, we'll be told that a Witch is someone with malevolent supernatural powers, usually a woman in league with the devil or similar evil forces. In appearance, the Witch could be an ugly old hag or a beautiful and enchanting yet dangerous woman.

Thanks to developments over the last several decades, if we dig a bit deeper into the dictionary definition, we may see a slight nod to contemporary religious practices.

Recent history aside, the word Witch has been used for centuries to demonize women, with the direct intent to disempower them and push them into submission. There are a multitude of theories for the cause of witch hunts and trials in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, such as squashing other religions and related practices, seizing land and property, ridding a town of unwanted and marginal people, and getting back at neighbors, but they all have fear at the heart of them. The vast majority of victims were women, particularly those working as midwives and healers, elderly widows, and young women who were the objects of desire and jealousy.

It is highly unlikely that most victims of the witch trials were Witches in the sense that we will be discussing in this book. Rather, they were scapegoats who took the blame for whatever went wrong in a village or town or suited the agenda of those making the accusations. During these times, the Witch was the central focus of subconscious or unspoken fears, desires, and dangers. Witch hunters spread propaganda to line their pockets, particularly in the form of the treatise the *Malleus Maleficarum*. This "Hammer of Witches" outlines how Witches worked with the devil, were the cause of diseases and unexplained deaths, and were a scourge on Christianity. Connecting the fear of the Witch with the possibility that anyone—but especially women—could be one made it easy to exercise any means to take out potential threats. This explains why so many definitions of Witch have an association with women, young and old alike.

But what about the time prior to the witch hunts and trials? If we look at the possible roots of the word Witch, we come across a wide variety of theories, from "wise one" and "seer" to "to know," " to observe," "to bend," and "to work magic." Why would collecting wisdom, knowing, seeing, and magic be a threat to Christianity? In a word: competition. Particularly at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was looking to expand its reach (and its coffers), other religions and practices were perceived as a threat. The Crusades were all about "rescuing" the "Holy Lands" from the Jews and Arabs and spreading Christianity

to the pagans and heathens while taking over their lands. Healing practices, mythology, and divination from other religions and cultures competed with the stories of Jesus's own healing magic, powers of sight, miracles, and divinity. In order to conquer those places and ideas, those things had to be vilified—to be seen as evil or unclean.

In her article on the derivation of the word Witch, Doreen Valiente explores many of the theories behind the origin of this word,[3] or at least those in popular discussion prior to her death in 1999. (Every decade, there seems to be a new idea about how the word developed, where it came from, and how it was used.) She states that she believes the word means that "a witch was a seer, a knower, an averter of evil" and that it did not possess any negative meanings until the advent of Christianity.

As much as I adore Doreen Valiente and can resonate with her summary, I think there has always been some fear attached to the word Witch. In every culture on this planet, there is a word used to describe a person who works with spirits and deities, who uses magic and divination in some form. In some places they may have two words—one to describe an individual who uses their powers for good and another to describe the opposite. But often they are one and the same, and anyone who deals with mysterious powers and the unknown realms is often looked upon with a mixture of fear and awe by others. On one hand, a Witch could be asked to make medicine to heal or perform a blessing, and on the other, they may be sought out to help administer a brew to cause an abortion or help ease someone into death. That line between benevolent and malevolent is a little too thin (if it exists at all) for many people to be comfortable with, even if they find both kinds of services convenient for their needs. Knowing human nature, even in societies where the Witch-person has garnered respect over the ages, there probably has been and still is a bit of awe and fear present in that mix.

## The Origin of the Witch

Where did the Witch come from? I would venture to say the Witch came into being at the point when human beings cognitively recognized the existence of the Other—the supernatural and unseen forces

3. Doreen Valiente, "The Derivation of the Word 'Witch,'" http://www.paganlibrary.com/reference/derivation_of_witch.php.

that surround us: gods, spirits, the dead, the mysteries of the world. Not only did they recognize it, but they sought ways to interact with it physically and metaphysically. The ability to be aware of these relationships and workings emerged concurrently with the evolution of the brain's ability to think in terms of abstract concepts (time, space, pattern, image) and to recognize and assign meaning to the cycles of life and death. As those concepts developed in our brains, it seems probable that we also recognized the importance of developing specialized skills in accordance with those abilities.

Through the creating and telling of myths, developing powers of prophecy and spirit travel, connecting with plants and animals to discover their secrets, and communicating with deities and ancestors, the Witch emerged as humankind struggled to survive. As with all skill sets, certain individuals may have displayed a natural talent, disposition, or extraordinary understanding of their world, granting them an elevated position in the group. Knowledge would be shared with the young, and ways and reasoning passed down through training when possible—similar to how one would teach hunting, fishing, building, and other necessary crafts and skills.

It's quite likely that very early on, the Witch had an integral place in society, tending to the group's spiritual needs as well as healing and other arts. A group typically functions best when each person has a role that they focus on, rather than all members trying to cover all the same bases at the same time. We tend to naturally specialize so that our energy is conserved and everyone contributes in a way that's effective for the larger group. Whether the group was nomadic or put down roots, every member had a purpose. More often than not, a person had multiple roles or positions as well. Look at history all the way to modern existing tribal cultures and you'll see the specialization at work: hunters, leaders, gatherers, warriors or guardians, weavers and crafts folk, farmers, herders, bakers, blacksmiths, teachers, childcare providers, healers, and those who take care of the spiritual well-being of the people. Our modern-day "advanced" society has moved so far away from its roots and a truly rewarding work system that it's not surprising we feel so disassociated from ourselves and each other.

Many folks like to think the Witch came about through special divine intervention (which I'm not discounting here), but really mastering any task or specialty requires a sort of intuitive talent (whether it's seemingly natural or second nature) or takes a great deal of practice to absorb. We each have things we are wired to do best, and that can seem supernatural or extraordinary to others in comparison. Gathering and wildcrafting requires a certain kind of sight and understanding of how things grow. Hunting requires another set of skills for tracking and killing. The same is true for agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, cooking, and so forth. The diversity of talent found within all human beings is a wonderful thing to behold.

We tend to think that early Homo sapiens were primitive in comparison to us, but we share the same brains and bodies. While they may not have had modern science to explain how the solar system works, or microscopes to view cells and microbes, our ancestors lived much closer to the natural world than we do. They saw and lived through connections that most of us miss. It is also silly to dismiss their ideas about how the world works as superstitions—especially when a fair number of people of this planet currently believe in a roughly two-thousand-year-old recycled myth about how a possibly divine man dying on a piece of wood saved the world from sin and will come back again at any moment to bring about the end of the world.

When we look at the development of the Witch compared to the evolution of civilization, it doesn't seem very mystical or mysterious. I feel that with Witchcraft there is a tendency to want to have some kind of supernatural evidence, more clues that point to how special Witches are. This desire is understandable. When most of what you do is to deal with the unseen, you don't want to be completely ostracized by your neighbors, family, or friends—you want a good story to protect and root you.

Nearly every book I pick up on Witchcraft nowadays talks about either the angelic origins of the Witch or the concept of "Witch blood." In several different traditions of Witchcraft, you will find stories of the Watchers and the Nephilim. A term commonly translated as "giants," the Nephilim show up in the book of Genesis, the book of Enoch, the

book of Jubilees, and other small parts of the Old Testament. In some cases they are referred to as great men, and in other places, wicked beings. Some people believe the Nephilim are the offspring of sexual relations between fallen angels and human women: "The legend of the Watchers relates how two hundred sons of heaven descended to earth and took as wives the daughters of men. The celestial beings, angels, taught their mates the forbidden arts of magic, botany, astronomy, astrology, and the use of cosmetics. Azazel, leader of the Order of Watchers, instructed mankind on the manufacture and use of weapons in the art of war."[4]

Other interpretations view the Nephilim as being the offspring of Seth and Cain—and see them as abominations because they did not worship Yahweh. This version tends to appeal to those who like a darker approach that gives that god the proverbial finger. Whether they are the products of fallen angels or of heretics, the descendants of Seth are often counted as among those destroyed by the great flood. But let's focus a little more on those angels:

> The egregoroi are those angels who keep unsleeping watch over mankind and all creation. The same noun also occurs in *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch (Apocrypha)*. In the Greek translation of The Book of Enoch, a Watcher is called an egregoros. In Greek the verb *egregorein* means "to keep watch, to stay awake."
>
> Only two hundred of the Watchers mentioned in the Old Testament were led astray by the beauty of mortal women and descended to earth in the year 1000 [after creation]. Many others remain on watch in the heavens.[5]

If you're like me, you're probably wondering at this point what angels have to do with Witchcraft, specifically angel penis.[6] Well, I'm glad you asked! You may have noticed that Mathiesen mentions the book of Enoch

4. *The Witches' Almanac* (1973–1974), author unattributed (likely editor Elizabeth Pepper).

5. Robert Mathiesen, "Watching Creation: Egregore," *The Witches' Almanac* (2008), https://thewitchesalmanac.com/watching-creation-egregore. See also "The Book of Enoch" in the same issue.

6. Nevermind that angels are supposedly beyond gender…

in the previous quote. If you're at all familiar with Western esotericism, you probably have heard of the Enochian alphabet and the sixteenth-century scholars/occultists Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley. It was during their era that grimoires of magic, alchemy, and other occult sciences became all the rage among the wealthy scholarly folk in Europe.

In the fifteenth century, the penalty for being accused of witchcraft moved from being a relatively minor sentence to becoming a punishable-by-death offense. Alongside this shift, witch hunting became a profitable venture and the persecution of witches spread for another three centuries. So it's not surprising that grimoires and other magical works from that era started to allude to the belief that only those born to magic (from within the womb) can become true masters and be gifted gracefully in all matters of life (aka born into wealth, class, or privilege).[7] Ordinary people might learn how to do magic adequately but would find God's disfavor quickly and find ruin. To connect the dots, these magicians focused on the part where the fallen angels taught the Nephilim how to do magic and other occult wisdom. Logically, humans who could understand and do magic clearly had the blood of the Nephilim in their veins. Therefore, their study of such sciences—combined with the fact that they were wealthy—clearly showed that *they* were favored by God (nevermind the detail that the Nephilim have quite the mixed reputation in the Bible or were supposedly all destroyed). Their work could be accepted and respected by society as long as they stayed on the good side of wealthy patrons, the ruling class, and religious institutions, unlike those other people who clearly were not born to magic from the womb—you know, the poor people being persecuted and killed for doing Witchcraft. Yes, indeed, folks: white dude privilege at work! Of course things did get really

7. In Aphorism 17 of *Arbatel: Of the Magic of the Ancients*, the Latin grimoire of ceremonial magic published in 1575 and translated into English by Robert Turner, it says: "A man that is a true Magician, is brought forth a Magician from his mothers womb: others, who do give themselves to this office, are unhappie." This concept is repeated throughout the text, and the work greatly influenced John Dee and many other notable occultists. Numerous Spiritualist and magic texts published in the late 1800s credit the German scholar Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535) with insisting that a man must be born a Magician from his mother's womb, though Agrippa's precise meaning may refer more precisely to a man knowing his own path versus having an angelic birthright: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A26564.0001.001/1:24.6.4?rgn=div3;view=fulltext.

hairy toward the end of the witch hunts, and not even the rich were safe if accused repeatedly, so any talk of magick went underground for a while.

Then in the early middle part of the nineteenth century, we saw the rise of Spiritualism in Europe and North America. Spiritualism focuses on the belief that the spirits of the deceased can and do wish to communicate with the living. Furthermore, spirits—because they are closer to the divine—are able to direct and guide humans on matters of the soul and moral living. Many of the movers and shakers of the early movements that spawned Spiritualism were students of the occult. Throughout numerous writings (including the work of revolutionary figures Allen Putnam and Emma Hardinge Britten, among others), we can see that they found and latched onto that sixteenth-century "born to magic" idea and brought it forward in a similar way. They claimed that their skills as mediums and other abilities were God-given in the womb and therefore were nothing evil or unnatural. For a while, being a medium, magician, or Witch was all rather synonymous and considered natural—and socially acceptable! Even though the popularity of Spiritualism began to wane in the early twentieth century, justification of psychic skills and magical abilities via angelic blood found its way into modern magical societies and traditions of Witchcraft.

I find Watcher history and lore fascinating, but it doesn't really resonate with me or seem all that relevant to my actual practice. You would think that someone who works with myths and art as a living would be more romantic about these things, but I'm not. You're telling me that some angelic teachers many ages ago, whose job it was to instruct humankind, looked at human women and thought, *How you doin'?* And that through their union we got Witches? And that those who come to Witchcraft now probably have that angelic blood from way back when running in their veins? Sure, okay. Also, what's to stop the same thing from happening *today*? It's hard to miss, but at the end of the passage I quoted from Robert Mathiesen earlier in this chapter is this line: "Many others remain on watch in the heavens." It's been a few thousand years, so what's to say that a few more Watchers haven't defected along the way and slept with humans? It's quite a probable idea actually, if you want to buy into the original story. However, that modern consider-

ation would not technically be scripture, and when you want to hold up "Christian" ideals to appeal to those who may persecute you, it's akin to biblical fan fiction.

The other curious thing that seems often forgotten is the fact that the fallen angels taught humanity a lot of different skills—not just magic, and certainly not things we would necessarily think of as being in the blood. (Excellent plumber? There's probably an angel for that!) Some people excel at music, others at math and science, and some are incredible marksmen.

Perhaps that's all in the genes, but attributing any of these skills to angel penis seems rather pointless. You can look to any culture on this planet and you will find a corresponding story about how humans learned to use fire, make weapons, identify useful plants, and develop a wide array of arts. The Titan Prometheus in Greek mythology, Loki from Nordic tales, Anansi in African folklore, and Coyote in Native American legends all have stories of how they brought wisdom and skills to humanity. Correlating figures who work specifically with magic and Witchcraft, such as Freya, Hekate, and Circe, all refer to cunning skill combined with wisdom as part of the source of their powers. In their stories, you will find that being a Witch is not necessarily a bloodline gift but can be bestowed upon a worthy individual through both blessing and study.

Let's think for a moment about all those virgin mother stories that have been kicking around for several thousand years. (Spoiler alert: Jesus wasn't the first.) Oh, it was *divine* intervention that made this extra-special person? Because humans aren't special enough, or a tainted woman couldn't produce such a thing? Must have been heavenly penis! To be blunt, I think modern Witchcraft needs to dump the patriarchal bullshit and Abrahamic entanglements. There is so much more profound inspiration to be found in both history and the world around us.

Am I demystifying the roots of Witchcraft? Some may see it that way, but I think instead we're getting closer to the actual roots. The Nephilim and their supposed influence on modern Witchcraft is fairly recent on the timeline of history, coming largely out of ceremonial magic fantasies and the desire to be socially acceptable or have special

dispensation. Carry those same ideas further into the magical societies and fraternities that spawned much of modern Paganism (Freemasonry, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Rosicrucianism) and you get some dangerously classist and racist ideas mixed in with a side of patriarchy. Yes, they preserved and passed on some knowledge, but to believe that was the only knowledge available concerning Witchcraft and it could be saved only by these elite folks is really narrow-minded.

Witchcraft from women-related areas (such as cooking magic, body wisdom, and herbal remedies) and folklore from common or rural people and from non-white people were often ignored or dismissed as "low magic." The fact that those areas were largely ignored by wealthy occult dudes doesn't mean they ceased to exist.[8] They have and do continue on, without the patriarchal stamp of approval.

To be fair, much of modern Paganism and occultism does owe a debt of gratitude to the mid-twentieth-century folks who brought Witchcraft back into the spotlight, for better or worse. They, in turn, stood on the shoulders of the Spiritualists and similar practitioners who helped change the laws of the lands, making it possible to even bring such things back into public consciousness. They all have made important contributions that are worth investigating, and it is history that shouldn't be ignored. What I caution against is seeing their work as the only way to look at Witchcraft, or to believe it's the only valid source. Remember, practically every culture has a word that is equivalent to *Witch*. No one culture owns the real estate that is Witchcraft. They all have it in some form or variation.

It's also small-minded to think only in definitive, linear terms when it comes to wisdom and knowledge. If the source of magic is a monstrous coupling that happened thousands of years ago, you're almost saying that myths exist only in the past. It stops the mind from considering that amazing things could happen today or from realizing that new information could be passed on and lost wisdom revealed again. So many traditions recognize that spirits, deities, and the deceased can instruct us in this life. The whole story of Aradia, the daughter of Di-

8. Charles Leland, the folklorist, could be considered an exception, with his research.

ana, being sent to earth to instruct the people in Witchcraft is just one example of a much more recent sharing of knowledge. Knowledge is never truly lost; it can be hidden only for a time.

Does it really matter where Witches come from? If we look at this practice as a calling, then why must being a Witch be more special than any other vocation? Do all blacksmiths have the blood of Wayland or Hephaestus in their blood? Are athletes the product of wayward sports angels? Where do you draw the line between inherent talents/gifts and hard work to develop a practice? Sure, we may have certain genetic markers that predispose us to certain skills, but what if spirit isn't passed down genetically but is distributed some other way? (Also, I'm not saying it was aliens... but hey, you never know.) We can get hung up on words and concepts. We can argue about what was real and what was contrived by enemies and conjured by fantasy and imagination. But it still doesn't change who or what the Witch is in essence—regardless of origin story, culture, gender, age, or practice.

## Natural-Born Witch vs. Made Witch

Okay, now that I've torched some popular origin myths, you're probably wondering what makes someone a Witch. Welcome to another area that's been hotly debated: Can one be a natural-born Witch or can a Witch be "made"? Is it something that just happens when you're born or is it a word you can just call yourself? Can you initiate yourself or does it require being initiated by someone else? Some people believe that yes, you can or must be born to it. Others say that you must be initiated in order to make deeper connections and tap into the power of Witch blood. Still others believe you can find your way on your own or with a little spiritual guidance from beyond.

### *The Traditional Initiatory Path*

I'll lay the most obvious option on the table first. If you want to study and become part of a specific tradition of Witchcraft or Wicca, then you're going to need to study with that school or group. There will likely be some sort of initiatory process after a predetermined length or amount of study. You just can't wake up and say, "Today I'm going to be

an Alexandrian or a Feri!" (Well, technically you can if you have already studied and become initiated into both traditions, though I'm not sure why you'd wake up deciding to be one or the other on any given day.) It's really rather simple: if you want to be part of a certain lineage, you need to study it and follow through with it.

### *Natural-Born Witch?*

There are certainly individuals who possess natural talents and abilities that enable them to be very successful with little effort from the get-go. For others, it may take a bit of hard work to get the same effect. It's important to keep in mind that all human beings at one time or another have "psychic" tendencies—this is not an unusual thing. What may cloud or suppress these additional senses is a person's upbringing. If your parents were hippies, then chances are you have an open mind toward New Age concepts (or completely reject them, depending on your relationship with your parents). If the religion you were raised with looks at divination as evil, then you may not be inclined to try to do tarot (unless you're feeling rebellious, in which case you'll probably be inclined to try everything). If you saw ghosts or spirits as a child and were told to stop playing with imaginary friends, you may have closed off that part of your brain temporarily. It may take some training to shed the blinders, but it can be done.

Still, being able to read cards, guess what someone is thinking, or sense trouble at home doesn't automatically mean you're a Witch. It *does* mean you're doing a pretty good job at accessing parts of the brain that others could use some work on. Good job! You definitely have some witchy attributes! Pagan spirituality and Witchcraft certainly do allow for a greater acceptance of these abilities than other religions and paths do, which is why they're often associated with each other.

### *The Self-Guided Path*

Most people think of Scott Cunningham's 1988 book *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* as the first self-initiatory guide, but Doreen Valiente's *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* was actually released in 1978 for those seeking to be Witches without access to covens. Is a self-guided path

a valid one? I certainly believe so—and it's not that new of a concept either. When a person begins to study this path seriously, the universe tends to help them understand things—if they don't have someone in person to guide them. There are also many stories of people being initiated in dreams and other visions by spirits or ancestors. If it's valid enough for Grandmom, gods, and spirits, who are we to argue? The idea of formal degrees and levels comes mainly from ceremonial magic societies. Witchcraft tends to be more organic than that, so it's hard to set a specific timeline to measure growth.

### *Going for the Title*

I don't want to rain on the parade of anyone who is looking to tap into their "inner Witch." There is a lot to be discovered within the archetype of the Witch, especially for those who feel marginalized. I know some people who like to use the title of Witch to feel special, dangerous, or powerful. It can be like a hat they put on for a week or a year. Maybe they're not serious about it at first, but they learn something about themselves and who they are in the process. In the end, it doesn't matter to me what you call yourself. That's totally up to you.

### *In Summary*

Witchcraft requires a great deal of dedication to study, research, and training. Talent in magic/Witchcraft/psychic abilities is part natural ability and part practice, like most things. If you put effort into it and you're serious about it, you'll find your way.

## Religion, Spirituality, or Vocation?

Back in the days of ye olde traditional Witchcraft online forums and IRC channels (aka the '90s), the debate about whether Witchcraft was a religion was a hot one, littered with the bodies of many whipped, deceased equines. My answer both then and now is the same: yes, of course, and no, not exactly. It comes down to one's perspective, background, and personal practice and to semantics.

If you're coming at Witchcraft from a Wiccan perspective, then of course you're going to say that "this is my religion." Wicca, as it has

developed from Gardner to today, has been based on the concept of reviving both Witchcraft/cunning folk practices and ancient beliefs in respecting the land and deities of old. It's rooted in a participant, group-working structure based on its more ceremonial magic roots (Golden Dawn, Freemasonry, the O.T.O., etc.) and purposefully was developed as a religion. It's recognized today in many places as a legitimate world religion under the umbrella of Neo-Paganism. (I would argue that it pretty much provided the skeleton structure of said umbrella, along with Druidry.)

But then there's another perspective where you view Witchcraft as a magical practice that is not necessarily tied to any specific belief system. You could be a P-word of some sort, but maybe you're an atheist, animist, or agnostic, or maybe you identify more comfortably as a Christian, Jew, or Buddhist.[9] You're not going to feel in any way that Witchcraft is your religion. It's a thing you do.

When you hear the word *religion*, you may think something on the order of "a group of people holding a similar set of beliefs and morals, gathered in a somewhat organized fashion." For extra flourishes, throw in a temple or church, tax-free status, and legal recognition. But if we look at the root of the word religion, it can be interpreted as "to reconnect." What are we connecting to again? We can consider religion as a means to understanding ourselves and our relationship with the divine. It can be personal and unique, without all the other baggage. Think about it.

When I ask myself "What is my religion?" I'm seeking to define how I personally connect with my spiritual self, the world around me, and the divine. It doesn't directly involve anyone else. I believe there are many gods (polytheism), without subscribing to one pantheon. I also see the sacredness and divine interconnection of all things (pantheism), *and* I believe that creatures, places, and things can hold unique spiritual energy (animism). I don't use the term *worship* in regard to anything I do. How I interact with all of these things is strongly determined by my path as a Witch. For ease, I can just toss on the label *Pagan*, which

9. P-word = Pagan, Polytheist, Pantheist, etc.

I do occasionally without blinking an eye. But it doesn't even begin to describe all of what I just described.

Then there are the myriad interpretations of the word *Witchcraft*. The easiest breakdown of this word is "craft of the Witch," but for some people that automatically equates to magick of some sort—and there are many varieties to consider. For others it means the knowledge and use of a wide variety of practices and techniques that probably also include spellcraft. I follow the latter understanding, so for me, Witchcraft does not automatically equate to spellcraft.

Spellcraft is the craft of creating spells. Witches can do far more than just cast spells. They work with spirits and walk in liminal places. Witches act as guides, teachers, counselors, psychics, healers, protectors, and artisans. Spells can be done by anyone, without much investment of time or experience. In this understanding, calling yourself a Witch simply because you occasionally use magick is like calling yourself a doctor because you know how to treat a cut or calling yourself a plumber because you replaced the broken chain on the toilet. That's why I'm not a fan of making *spellcraft* synonymous with *Witchcraft*.

For me, Witchcraft is how I see that everything is interwoven. It is more than magick and spells. It is not easily defined or organized into a system for others, but it carries legal status and recognition. It is both my spiritual system and my vocational practice. How is being a Witch my vocation? It is my profession, a worthy trade requiring great dedication and skill. The word *vocation* also tends to have spiritual or religious implications—and I am a priestess as well. But that's not all. Being a Witch interweaves with being an artist, an author, a designer, and a dancer, all considered professions in their own right. I make art professionally that taps into the spiritual realm and enlists spellcraft as part of its execution. I write about Witchcraft. When I design sigils and other items, I'm tapping into my training as a Witch. Lastly, when I perform and teach dance, something metaphysical is at work—healing spirits, hearts, and bodies through movement.

So now that we have all the parts on the table, you can see why the response to the question of whether Witchcraft is a religion can be so varied and even volatile. It really has so much to do with where you're

coming from and what the words mean to you and how you interact with them. The connecting factor in all of this is *you*. In the end, that's the main person to whom it should matter. It's what drives you and your practice. Everything else is just words.

## Participant or Practitioner?

We still have a few more sticky areas to delve into, and this next one is often overlooked or not even considered. We're going to look at the Witch as practitioner versus participant, because they are different things that can help you define your path and what you will get out of it. A practitioner is a person actively engaged in an art, discipline, or profession. A participant is a person who takes part in something.

Looking at how the Neo-Paganism movement has interwoven with Witchcraft over the last half-century, you can see two kinds of paths emerging. One path focuses on creating community through building or rebuilding a religion, making it participant-minded, while the other path focuses more on power over the self and learning a craft, making it practitioner-geared. Sometimes the paths do overlap, but it's the latter path that builds my root definition of the Witch. To help us see the difference, let's consider the following metaphor.

Imagine a decent-size boat that's seaworthy. Everybody who gets on that boat may or may not have similar belief systems and approaches to getting things done. They may know how to drive the boat or how to build it, or maybe they just love being on the boat and looking out at the water. Maybe they fish and do other activities from the boat. They all really like getting on this boat for their own reasons.

And then there's a person we'll call the captain for the sake of this metaphor. The captain may care deeply for the other people who get on the boat, or at the bare minimum this person may just make sure everyone gets where they need to go or does what they want to do safely, regardless of who they are. The captain not only understands how the boat is made and how it functions but also understands how to read the water, the sky, the winds, and the sea life. The captain knows how to navigate and guide. The captain knows the boat best and has an intimate relationship with it.

Can you guess who's the Witch in that metaphor and why? The Witch isn't in it halfway. It's all or nothing. The path permeates everything they do. It's not a once-a-month or once-a-week thing, something hauled out and dusted off, but rather it's a lens through which everything is viewed every day. It defines how they interact with people, the world around them, and everything unseen as well. The Witch is the navigator of their own path and a guide for others.

And none of these things can be learned from any one book or a series of the very best books or grimoires (no, not even this book). This wisdom comes from doing, from being, from trying, failing, observing, and learning—in real time and space, over an extended period of time, at your own pace. A preset determination of guided years of study doesn't guarantee that actual experience, nor can it dictate the pace at which *you* will move. And you may participate in the activities of others and get on other boats to see how things are done, but you always come back to your own boat, guiding your way through your own ocean.

*Journal Reflection:* Do you see yourself best suited to forging your own path or following an established one? If you are currently following an established path, is it something you foresee being able to tailor to your needs?

## What It Means to Be a Witch

We've looked at the definitions and the history of the word Witch. But what does it mean to actually be a Witch? What is the place of the Witch today? How is identifying with that path relevant to living in today's modern society? The following are all things to consider as you read and work through this book. You'll need to form your own opinion of what being a Witch means to you because it's *your* path.

- The Witch's place in society is often found on the edge of it or even hidden underneath it.
- To be a Witch is to be *of* the marginal and *for* the marginal of society.
- This path is often iconoclastic, following a route that goes against the grain of the majority.

- The Witch has long been the one who knows, the one you go to when no one else will help, in the dark depths of night, in the hidden part of the woods.
- The Witch is there to fill the void when conventional (or mundane) means just won't do.
- The way of the Witch is not an easy one—nor, despite the cyclical brushes with the limelight, a truly popular one.
- The Witch exists in a space simultaneously of the community and not of the community, partly because the Witch deals in matters of the Other (the gods, the spirits, the dead, the mysteries) and partly because the Witch is a keeper of knowledge, an independent thinker, and essentially a loner. When you see the world differently, it changes how you interact with it.
- The Witch is genderless.
- The Witch is the gateway to the unknown, the dangerous, and the wild.
- The Witch is relevant today because we have become largely separated from ourselves, from one another, and from the world. The Witch is the weaver who can shift the pattern and reconnect the threads.

## Choosing the Word Witch

So with all that in mind, why call yourself a Witch? It is definitely a loaded word that can't be thrown around lightly. Some people choose *Witch* because they see it as reclaiming the word from centuries of bad connotations. They are connecting with its roots and perhaps earlier meanings of being the wise one, the shifter, the changer, the seer. Others choose it as their label because of its power to stir the imagination and perhaps to summon a sense of fear or awe or to shock. Regardless of the reason, there truly is an undeniable power in choosing the word Witch. It evokes a sense of danger, a knowledge of hidden realms and charms, and an air of mystery.

I choose the word Witch because I feel it best describes who I am and what I do. I am not a magician or a sorceress, nor am I a shaman. I am urban yet wild. My magick is both visible and unseen. I seek to tap

into my own power and that of the universe, and weave balance as I do so. The work I do is for myself as well as others—other people, spirits, and deities alike.

*Journal Reflection:* Do you identify with the word *Witch*? Why or why not? If not, is there another word you use?

## What Is a Real Witch, Anyway?

The final thing I want to talk about in this chapter is perception and reality. If you've spent a hot minute perusing online communities, visited an occult shop, or ventured out to a gathering, you may have heard one or all of the following statements:

- "You're not a real Witch if you hex."
- "You're not a real Witch if you *don't* hex."
- "You can't be a Witch and believe in gods."
- "You can't be a Witch and *not* believe in gods."
- "If you don't practice or believe this, then you're not a real _____."
- "You can only be a Witch if you undergo this initiation process."
- "You can only be a Witch if it has been documented in your blood for centuries."
- "_____ aren't real Witches."
- "Only real Witches do _____."
- "You can't call yourself a Witch because you're not the right gender/color/age/religion."
- "Nobody should call themselves a Witch because _____."
- "Unless you live in the woods and/or are in direct contact with nature all the time, you're not a real Witch."

People can be very vocal about what they believe is authentic, actual, or real, but the moment they start making declarations along these lines, things get dicey. They are basing their opinions mainly on their own personal experience or what they've been told, without looking at the larger picture or entertaining other possibilities.

There was a time in my late teens and early twenties when I was very adamant about knowing the difference between being a Witch and being a Wiccan. I wasn't Wiccan, and I bristled at the suggestion, even if it was a generally well-meaning person trying to show their understanding: "Oh, you're a Witch? My daughter is a Wiccan too!" If you try to explain to that nice older lady why you believe a Wiccan and a Traditional Witch are very different, you're going to be met with a blank stare. The lady who said this to me was probably just trying to be nice or relate to me in some way. It's like trying to explain the difference between a Catholic, a Methodist, and a Lutheran to someone who doesn't really care or just wants to make polite conversation.

In the twenty or so years since then, I've learned a few things:

- It is not my concern to worry about how other people choose to label themselves. I can't control what others do; I am only responsible for what I do and the results of my actions.
- The only person to whom the label truly matters is myself.
- What I *do* is far more important than what I call myself or what others may call me, and the same goes for everyone else. People's actions are more important than their labels.

It's one thing to be concerned when the label someone gives themselves is seen by the general public. We still see unfortunate, misinformed news headlines such as "Ritual Murder," "Wiccan Sacrifice," and "So-Called Druid Is Found Guilty of _____." But I think most of the current unrest is really in-community bickering about semantics.

I'd venture that the reason this is an issue is because we're relatively young as a community, but I also know from personal experience that other groups bicker too, whether it's Jews, Christians, gamers, or bellydancers. I think that maybe the root of it is insecurity—impostor syndrome, if you will—worrying about whether we're doing it right and what others will think of us: *If that person is really what being an X is all about, what does that make me?* Perhaps another part is the desire to get involved in other people's business and prove ourselves to be superior in some way.

Also, I think we all do enjoy a visit to the catty corner at times, myself included; it's a relief to roll our eyes and poke fun at something that doesn't fit in our spectrum. My particular sore spot is when people espouse damaging practices. The challenge is finding the line between comic relief and being a complete asshole, which, again, I myself sometimes have a problem discerning—but as my friend Michael wisely noted to me, "We all have our flaws." The best way to combat the whole thing is to respectfully suggest resources that may have better information (people, books, links, etc.) and/or put your own work out there. We can bitch about what we don't like to see, or we can actually do something productive to provide a better example.

Here are a few more sentiments that may bring you some peace:

- How you see and interact with the divine is important only to you and the divine—and the people you work with directly.
- The age or origin of any path or tradition is meaningless and is not up for comparison for validity points. Everything started somewhere, and most (if not all) have sketchy origins littered with truth. If it works, it works—and don't assume that a practitioner isn't aware of their path's origins. It's their path, and it works for them. It doesn't have to work for you.
- Everyone starts somewhere; we're all newbies at some point. Only Athena and a few others were born fully formed, and that was not a guarantee they had their act together either.
- Do the work—in particular, do *your* work.

When you're interacting with someone and they use a label to describe themselves, a great way to actually interact with them is to ask, "What does that word mean to *you*?" It can be a great way to start a really interesting and healthy discussion.

Try to keep these things in mind as we move forward together on this path. They'll help you stay focused on what you wish to accomplish, unlike the head-monkeys that probably want to distract you from pushing ahead.

# A Path of Your Own Making

*At the Loom:* Thread the warp strong, and spin and dye your weft in preparation to weave your work. Choose the colors that are yours alone.

*Liminally Minded:* In here, everything is breath: held, taken in, blown out, stolen, and given all at once. We own it, and it owns us.

Now we're going to get down to the business of defining your own path. When it comes to Witchcraft, authenticity has nothing to do with age. Rather, the focus should be on answering the question *Does this work—for me?* How do you determine what will work best for you? In this chapter we'll take into consideration some key information that will assist you in crafting an authentic path of Witchcraft that will do exactly that. There are four overall areas to consider: yourself, inspiration, location, and schedule. In each of these larger topics, we will investigate the nuances that can bring everything into alignment.

## Questioning Authenticity

I think it's best that we get the authenticity debate out of the way. Wondering where one falls on someone else's "real Witchcraft" measuring stick causes unnecessary stress. Their stick doesn't matter—yours does. To be authentic means "to be real, genuine, verified, representing one's true nature or beliefs, to be true to oneself." Notice the lack of "the oldest" or "the most cool" or "having the greatest number of altar decoration" there.

Read again the last five words of the definition. Authenticity is *being true to oneself* in what one does. That means the search of authenticity is a quest to find what's real, what works, and what is true for that specific person.

Authenticity is not about trying to forge a link to a distant or imagined past to justify your system. Some people struggle so hard to cling to an aura of mystery and ancient connections to achieve a sense of validation for what they're doing. There's a weight that comes with that facade that holds back growth and prevents them from finding truth. Those same people often push against and try to tear down others in order to feel some sense of superiority—like *that* really matters for anything truly affecting what we do. We can't recreate the past, nor can we relive it. Instead, we can learn from the past and be inspired by it, whether it's something that happened five minutes or five years or five centuries ago. If there are connections from the past that interest you, that's great. But your tradition doesn't have to be three hundred years old to be effective or "real." Authenticity is about doing what works best for you with what you have available.

Whom do you need to prove your path to if it works for you? If you strive to maintain balance, to know yourself, and to take responsibility for your actions, it doesn't matter how old or new the tradition is or who may approve or disapprove of it. That stuff really doesn't matter in the big picture. Instead, when you decide to be authentic and truly live your own tradition, the universe opens up in new ways—or old ones you may have not seen before. Again I will remind you: the authentic path of Witchcraft is the one that works.

## RITES: Defining Your Path

Now that we've kicked the authenticity worries to the curb, let's get to work on the elements you need to focus on. I have found that there are five essential areas to consider when developing and expanding your path. To make it all easier to remember, I've organized them into the handy acronym of *RITES*.

Here are the words that make up RITES:

**R**oots
**I**nspiration
**T**ime
**E**nvironment
**S**tar

Like the five points of a pentagram or a hand, with its four fingers and thumb, RITES gives you a foundation to build upon, presents ideas to grasp and grow, and instills a sense of how and where to direct what you build and put it into action. *Roots* is about exploring the origins and makeup of you. *Inspiration* delves into what inspires and influences you. *Time* asks you to think about your schedule and overall calendar of the year. *Environment* is an examination of location, particularly where you live. *Star* helps you craft a system to guide your path.

The word *rite* itself invokes a sense of ceremony, ritual, or customary procedure. Rites can be handed down or they can be crafted anew, depending on what needs to be done. We do both with Modern Traditional Witchcraft, integrating the old and incorporating the new to design our paths. Keep that in mind as we look carefully at RITES.

## Roots: The Call of Blood

A seed doesn't become a living, active entity until it sends down its first taproot. Once it does that, it gains traction, gathers nourishment, and starts to expand, building outward in all directions, flowering and spreading its own seeds. With roots, we're going to consider you and where you come from, looking at the generations that have taken root, blossomed, and seeded, and eventually created you. These past roots in turn help give you a basis to build and grow upon.

When someone becomes interested in Witchcraft, it's not uncommon for them to go looking outside of themselves for answers. There is an urge to find outside reassurance, to be drawn to paths that are more defined, firmly structured, or easily available, or just to find more information. There's nothing wrong with any of these motives as long as you come back to the foundation of you.

Much of what you need in terms of guidance and insight is waiting right there in your blood. No, I'm not talking about the possibility of having some sort of extra-special DNA thanks to elves, angels, demons, aliens, or cats. I'm talking about where you and your ancestors come from. (Note: For my readers who don't know their family history for whatever reason, please bear with me. There are ideas for you, too. I know it can be frustrating and painful not to know your precise origins.)

Of course, the matter of ancestors is rarely simple and is prone to complication and obfuscation. What happens when your family did not come from the place where you now live? There's the reality of being separated from the "homeland," as well as the likelihood that your relatives may have mingled with people from other places. Even if they settled in a new place for several generations, what if they moved from one end of the country to the other? People like to talk about lineage and how they're "from" countries they've never even been to, but how does that really work out? Particularly here in the United States, we get hung up on the idea of being from someplace else, looking for this mythical home an ocean or two away.

When we stop to think about history, we realize that human beings have always been on the move, for thousands upon thousands of years. From following prey and adapting to climate shifts to opening up trade routes across deserts, seas, and mountains, we've constantly been in motion from our earliest days. From economic opportunities, natural disasters, war, and other humanmade disasters to adventure and exploration, we continue to follow in the steps of our ancestors and keep on the move. Of course, everywhere we have gone, we have taken our ideas, practices, and beliefs with us. These have met and merged (or conflicted) with others and have been biologically and culturally augmented to account for the topography, weather, seasons, and animals we have found ourselves surrounded by. We have added new practices and beliefs as our world demands, and similarly discarded those that no longer work for us. Humanity and culture are amalgamations—a fact to keep in mind as your consider your own roots.

It's rare nowadays to have a continuous hereditary line tracing back to one country (like all Irish or all Japanese), and even then, what does

that mean? Unless your family history has a long line of inbreeding to preserve royal lines, your roots are probably far more diverse than you can imagine. When I was a Witchlet, there was a lot of talk about where your tradition came from, with a sense that that's what made it valid. There were books popping up on Irish, Scottish, Italian, German, and other country-specific brews of Witchcraft and other paths, which is nice if that's what you closely identify with. But I come from a long line of people who apparently liked to sleep with people from other countries. I couldn't take just one type or kind and say, "Okay, this is me. This is the dress of Witchcraft I need to put on." If you're from a similar melting pot, you don't have to subscribe to just one place of origin. It's wise anyway to consider all the options.

Your DNA is not the be-all and end-all, but it is definitely a good place to start from. It's a twofold consideration: what cultures are a part of you, and what family practices have been handed down, most likely because of those cultures? A common first response may be, "But there's no Witchcraft in those cultures, and my family isn't Pagan!" First of all, every single culture on this planet has their own myths, folklore, and what might be called magical or "superstitious" practices. Second, there are a lot of things that can be done and passed down through a family that contain those magical and mythical elements without them being called Witchcraft. We tend to overlook those practices because they are so close and familiar to us, especially when we feel that what we're looking for isn't immediately adjacent to us. So it's time to lift that veil and look a little more closely at those roots.

The first consideration is where you come from. What do you know about your family tree, either from stories, family research, or perhaps DNA testing? Of course, family stories aren't always terribly accurate. Details can be misremembered and stories drastically embellished or changed for a wide variety of reasons. Sometimes the truth was covered up to hide something that may have been considered socially embarrassing during that era, such as an unwed or unplanned pregnancy, hidden sexual orientation, an unsavory reputation due to crime or abusive behavior, or prejudice based on skin color or class. Back then, some people would go a long way to cover up something that would surprise

us now. (Well, it hopefully would surprise us—our society still has a lot of issues it needs to get over.) Consider family stories a kind of folklore: the details may not always be correct, but what's the spirit of the story?

If you have only a general idea of your family origins, luckily there's the internet and a wide variety of ancestry websites that range in price from free to a fair amount of money. Ancestry is a pretty common question that sparks the human imagination, so that curiosity has made for an abundance of resources. Even if no one in your immediate family has done any research, there's a good chance that a cousin a few times removed has! There's also a plethora of DNA tests you can do that will give you a peek into your background. Results can vary depending on what they're testing for. It's also important to remember that results can vary from sibling to sibling. Technically you are most closely related to your siblings (if you have any) than you are to your parents, since your DNA is a combination of both. But every time an egg and a sperm combine, it's sort of like scooping from a giant cauldron of chromosome soup. Your sister could look just like your mother, but you might look more like your father because you are each different combinations of the same soup. (You can argue about who is made of more meatballs than noodles or vegetables at the next family dinner.)

When researching your ancestry, you can really find yourself going down a rabbit hole. However, our main focus here is to pinpoint some possible places of origin, whether that's a township, county, state, region, or country. This approach gives you somewhere specific to look at when it comes to folklore and anthropology. While it is possible that there are good books in the New Age / occult section that may cover a certain area or country, I'm going to advise you to head to a different section of the bookstore and look for books focusing on art, anthropology, regional history, and cultural mythology. Why is that? Always start with the source. How a culture has grown and changed, its customs, its artwork, and most especially its stories in the form of myth and folklore can provide a wealth of material for you to work with. These books may not have "Witchcraft" in the title, but history, art, and mythology can certainly have a powerful impact on your practice.

My favorite places to look for resources are at used bookstores and the library. Many small press, academic, or scholarly works can be hard to find and/or expensive, but your local library system may have them available to check out or at least read in the reference section. There are also ebooks and PDFs that are available for viewing online, especially those containing older material. It just takes a little time to do the research, and you can uncover a treasure trove!

What's the big deal about folklore and myths? It's foolhardy to dismiss myths as fictional stories or fairy tales to amuse children. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communicative art we have. We've been using it for countless generations to educate, entertain, advise, and commemorate. Why do we love movies, games, plays, and TV shows so much? They are all varieties of folklore that help us explore the human condition and the mysteries of the world. Modern media just happens to be the newest form of myth making and sharing. Ingrained in those stories are kernels of wisdom about the nature of the seen and unseen worlds: gods and goddesses, life and death, how things work, how to behave in certain situations—or how not to! By connecting to the folklore of a people/place, you can find deeper connections to your own roots—and yourself. There is something about how a culture builds and propagates myths that can give you a real flavor for how those people interact with life.

The second consideration reveals meaning in practices you might have thought of as just everyday or family quirks. The older I get, the more I think about certain things my grandparents did when I was little, as well as other people in my family. Often without much fanfare, perceptions, opinions, and how-tos are passed from generation to generation. Sometimes there's a reason or explanation for why something is done a certain way, and other times the practice is carried on because "it's what Grandmom did." Amulets that are worn or given for good luck, talismans to ward off the evil eye, scrolls and pictures to make a space sacred, coins and eggs used for divination: nearly every household has some variety of charm, with its related belief or purpose.

There's something wonderful about finding the hidden magic that is essentially in plain sight and already a part of you. Far too often we

can feel like we need official "Witchcraft" practices laid out by others in books in order to "do it right." It can definitely be fun to pick up new and different ways of doing things, but don't be afraid to look in your own proverbial family broom closet first. When possible, take the time to listen to the older members of your family, ask questions about how or why things are done certain ways, and make notes.

Of course, not every family situation is ideal. We may have a tumultuous or nonexistent relationship with our immediate family or be totally disconnected from our roots. Maybe a generation was cut out, causing a gap of information. Or there may be practices we personally don't agree with or find comforting. As we'll explore next, there are other ways to build a foundation that you can feel comfortable with. In chapter 5 we'll explore how knowledge can be passed down through a family, even if they're physically no longer on this plane.

*Research Suggestion:* If possible, make a family tree that includes the places or general locations that your family is from. Start with one that appeals to you most and research the history, mythology, and folklore of that area. You can craft it out of images from those places, be it landscapes, landmarks, artwork, food, or people.

## Inspiration: The Pull of Spirit

Looking at your heritage and family practices is definitely a strong foundation to start with, but it's not the only influence to consider. What are you most interested in when it comes to Witchcraft, and why? Is there a particular area that calls to you, such as herbalism, divination, the bardic arts, etc.? Are there particular stories, myths, themes, and deities that keep appearing in your life? We are often drawn to certain things for a reason. Sometimes it's because of our heritage, but often it can come seemingly out of left field—from a culture or place you're not familiar with but that keeps repeating in your life. How do we explain that and what do you do about it?

I'm not one to fixate on the concept of past lives—I'd rather focus on the present. Yet the idea that we live many times in numerous incarna-

tions and places does strike a chord with many people. Maybe we cycle from life to life, changing genders, roles, cultures, and places so that we can experience life from many angles. Perhaps every time we die, our spirit returns to a primordial soup bowl, and parts of us get ladled into newly combined spirits. We could even be our own ancestors, following those theories. So perhaps something we've been fascinated with from a young age or unexpectedly drawn to later in life comes from a memory or preference in a previous life. Or they could be markers we set into our own thread before coming into this life. Even little things that seem incongruous can have a big effect down the line.

I remember a time around age six or seven when I was working on drawings in the living room by myself and my mom walked in from the adjacent kitchen. I was drawing in there because it was the quiet room, with no television or loud distractions, so I could concentrate. For no particular reason, I announced to her that one day I would marry someone who played the violin. I don't quite remember what she said in response, probably something like, "You can marry whomever you want when you're old enough." I never was interested in learning to play the violin myself, but I found its sound incredibly beautiful and still do. Ironically, my first marriage was to someone who claimed to me early on he wanted to learn to play the violin, yet he would never follow through on it. When I got into dance, I felt an even deeper connection to the sound of the violin powerfully through my body. That pull would lead me to a certain song played by a particular band. While on tour, I happened to dance to that song without knowing that the musician who had created the part I loved the most—the violin—was attending that performance. That encounter would spark a successful professional relationship that eventually evolved into something more when our lives allowed it. So as it happened, I did actually come to marry a violinist.

There is also the concept of genetic memory, which I find very interesting.[10] From the field of psychology, genetic memory is the idea that powerful physical and emotional experiences can be incorporated

10. See https://futurism.com/memories-can-inherited-scientists-may-just-figured and https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/genetic-memory-how-we-know-things-we-never-learned.

into the genome and passed down the line. But is it happening at the cellular level, perhaps hiding out in our mitochondria. There's also the whole nature versus nurture discussion, but what about when you know things that you were never taught? If we're drawn to Witchcraft because there's a rumor that someone in our family was a Witch, does it mean that there's genetic memory being passed down? Or perhaps the fact that you're exposed to the idea because it's part of your family lore means that it becomes a product of your nurturing environment. I think we're a combination of many things, both in our genes and in our spirits, which is why "inspiration by spirit" is definitely something worth considering.

Sometimes you can be drawn to a specific deity, myth, or practice that is completely outside of your family or cultural background. Maybe from an early age you had dreams of a certain place or traveled somewhere you'd never been to previously but it felt so familiar.

So what do you do in this situation? Do you say no to that goddess who keeps visiting you because you're from one background and she from another? How does that even happen? If you are sincere in finding out more, then investigating more deeply is definitely a valid choice. You can avoid the downfall of cultural appropriation by doing cultural *appreciation* through proper research and careful study. Cultural appropriation is definitely a hot button topic right now. However, fear of being accused of it should not be something holding you back from digging deeper. There is a wide world of difference between cherry-picking things without ever attempting an in-depth study of them (especially with the goal of profiting off those ideas) and sincerely wanting to learn something through proper cultural exchange to make it part of your personal practice. Practice respect and you'll avoid the pitfalls.

Books, film, music, art, and other cultural material can definitely be helpful on your quest to understand something outside of your cultural wheelhouse. However, nothing replaces being able to actually talk to and work with practitioners of that path / culture. Even better, investing the time and money into traveling to a place that has inspired you can be an amazing, worthwhile experience. But you have to make connections and do the research first. Just showing up somewhere and expect-

ing to be taught isn't respectful or considerate. It's important to take the time to examine these things and build a study program for yourself. Realistically, the same is true for any area of practice, whether it's in your blood or not.

***Note:*** In chapter 5 we'll talk about working with deities directly. At this stage I just want to make it clear that googling "Kali Ma" and reading one Wikipedia article is not doing your homework or being responsible. Exploring a deity involves reading their myths from a variety of angles, seeking to understand their imagery, familiarizing yourself with spiritual practices associated with them, and taking the time to understand more about the people and place that deity comes from. This process takes time and effort that can't be measured by the number of articles one has read or statues bought on Amazon. Rather, you'll find it to be a lifelong experience that will continue to morph as you walk your path.

> *Research Suggestion:* Make a list of inspirations and practices that appeal to you. Start with your childhood and work your way to the present day. Are there connecting threads? Can you pinpoint how you got interested in these things? Mark the ones that particularly stand out to you, prioritize them by how much they pull your attention, brainstorm what you know about them already, and start to investigate how to learn more.

## Time: The Schedule of Person, Practice, and Place

Where you originate from and what inspires you are important things to evaluate in formulating your path, but many people fail to factor in the next vital column in our path building: schedule. We grow up with our schedules being dictated to us by our parents and family, teachers and educators, religion and government, jobs and duties, transportation, and possibly even partners and children. We get so sucked into having our itineraries charted out to us that we often disconnect from the world around us and even our own bodies. From there we can suffer from many physical, emotional, and even spiritual ailments brought on by a lack of proper rest and sleep, an unhealthy diet, and other stress-related factors. It's so

easy to feel obligated to do everything and to satisfy everyone else's needs. All the while, we neglect our own needs until the whole system crashes like an overheated hard drive.

It's vital that we actively foster a daily and yearly practice that matters to us. All too often, when I start to walk people through the first two steps of RITES, there is a tendency to get overwhelmed or push back with excuses like "I don't think I have time to do it right" or "Maybe later when I finish doing _____." Following the path of the Witch should empower you to take hold of your own schedule. Time is much more fluid than we think, and so is the practice of Witchcraft. You're not running a race to become the perfect Witch or playing a video game where you have to uncover all the treasures before time runs out. You really can go at your own pace—once you give yourself permission to figure out what that means for you.

In order to help you accomplish this task, we're going to look at several different facets of scheduling:

- The social schedule (school, work, family, friends)
- Your body's clock
- The lunar cycle
- The solar seasons
- Schedule of feast days (memory, celebration, anniversaries)

Take time to think about how these facets can play out in your life and in your practice. In setting up a practice, you need to consider your availability, your sleep patterns, the seasons, and what has personal significance for you. The combination of these areas will be fairly unique to you and therefore will be vital in figuring out what works best for you. Consider what makes you feel like you're part of a pattern and helps you acknowledge the passing of time. What you observe should be integrated into your practice because it calls to you, not because you feel obligated to follow a system manufactured by someone else.

### *The Social Schedule*

Whether you go to school, have a career, are raising a family, or have family obligations, as well as what you do with friends—these are all things that are expectations that affect your daily schedule. Sometimes these various factors all flow easily into practicing Witchcraft, and other times they seem to be in opposition or a barrier to your practice. Regardless, they all affect how your days and evenings are scheduled. When do you work? When do you play? Look at your average week and analyze which hours get devoted to where and whom. The reason for laying out your social schedule is so you can concretely see how much of your time is obligated to something or someone, along with how and why.

Another thing to consider is that your job may be directly related to your practice, even if your official title isn't "Supervising Witch." I know many people in the healthcare industry, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, therapists, scientists, and hospice workers, who are able to find that what they do correlates to their personal practice. They heal, administer treatments, and tend to all aspects of the life cycle through the eyes of a Witch. There are Witches who are lawyers, teachers, stay-at-home parents, and business administrators—all putting things in order with a side of magick. Musicians, artists, actors, writers, and dancers also often find that they weave Witchcraft into their craft. This manifestation of your Witchcraft through your job may not seem to fit the classic image of the Witch, but that does not invalidate your work in any way. You may already be busy "doing the work" without realizing it.

> *Research Suggestion:* Map out your average week. About how much time on average is devoted daily to work, family, schooling, hobbies, friends, etc.? When does free time occur for you?

### *Your Body's Clock*

Although many people are not consciously aware of it, every *body* has a preference for how and when it functions best. Your body has its own internal clock. My partner is a morning person. He can pop out of bed at an ungodly early hour (5:00–6:00 a.m.) and get most of his work accomplished before noon, regardless of the weather or season. Then he

starts to shut down around 9:00 p.m. My body prefers to get up a few hours later (8:00–9:00 a.m.), and does so much more easily when the sun is visible. I get the majority of my work done in the middle of the day, with an occasional second burst of energy for more work after dinner. I start to shut down around 11:00 p.m. and am usually in bed by midnight, so I'm not exactly a night owl. Those people function best in the late hours of the night and prefer to sleep late into the day.

Why is understanding your body's schedule important for Witchcraft? Knowing when you work best means you can plan your practice for those times. If you are a morning person, then plotting out some time in the morning to go for a walk outside or commune at your altar can help you create a meaningful daily practice that deepens your connection to everything. Just because there's a stereotype of Witches doing work late at night doesn't mean you're a failure because you fall asleep by 10:00 p.m. Listen to your body.

The social schedule has a heavy impact on your body's clock as well. In the best-case scenario, the social schedule is in line with what works best for you, so you spend less time fighting against your body's natural flow. When the social schedule works in opposition to your body, it tends to wreak havoc with your overall well-being. Sometimes you simply can't avoid this conflict and have to make do. However, being aware of it means you can try to take extra steps to care for your body.

> *Research Suggestion:* Examine the map you made for your social schedule. How does this line up with sleeping, eating, and general rest/relaxation? What are you doing to keep your body and overall health in balance?

### *The Lunar Cycle*

Once you start paying attention to your body's daily schedule, you will most likely start to notice another pattern involving the moon that occurs roughly on a monthly basis. The moon's position in orbit around the earth and the earth's orbital position around the sun affect how much of the moon is in shadow and how much is illuminated, causing the lunar phases. Approximately every twenty-eight days, the moon is

new, waxes until full, and wanes back to new again, which makes up the lunar month. Since the lunar month is slightly shorter than a calendar month, it's always shifting—not matching up with the start and end of each calendar month.

The moon has an effect on the oceans and other large bodies of water, creating shifts in high and low tides. The most extreme tidal marks happen during the full moon. Our bodies, being largely made up of water, are similarly affected by the cycles of the moon. We tend to experience an upsurge in activity during the full moon, hence the word *lunatic*—from Old French *lunatique*, from Late Latin *lunaticus* ("moonstruck"), derived from Latin *luna* ("moon"). Remember that werewolves and other supernatural beasts are said to undergo transformation by the light of the full moon. Many people report having a harder time falling and staying asleep during the full moon and feeling restless, whether or not the moonlight illuminates their sleeping quarters. Some people feel this as a boost of energy and others feel more anxious, sometimes causing them to act irrationally. Even law enforcement officers are aware of the phenomenon, and schedule more personnel to be on duty during the full moon.

By contrast, many people feel sluggish around the time of the new moon. The new moon tends to be a time of introspection. For some people this means it feels like an incubating period where they slow down comfortably and then start to generate new ideas. For others, this time can mean spiraling into depression, feeling stuck, or thinking more negative thoughts than normal.

Witchcraft has long been associated with the moon and its powers and effects. In folklore, Witches have been said to gather under the light of the full moon, and much of modern practice has followed suit. While the full moon could definitely align with the surge of energy that many people feel, the most logical correlation is that if you're gathering outside at night, the full moon is really bright (as long as there isn't a thick cloud cover)—which is handy for seeing your way in the dark and saving money on candles or batteries. But don't worry, I'm not out to ruin all of the mystery and fun of Witchcraft. I do subscribe to the theory that the lunar phases can affect us emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically. Therefore, there are definitely applications for ritual

and metaphysical purposes for them, which we will focus on in the next chapter.

The main point in bringing up the lunar cycle in the context of time is for contemplating how your body reacts to the moon phases. You don't *have* to hold a ritual just because the moon is full or new or somewhere in between. A monthly lunar ritual is not an obligatory thing, unless of course you have mandated such a thing for yourself or made an agreement of some sort. Maybe you are drawn to do something specific at a certain stage of the waxing moon or the new moon because of how it makes you feel, or maybe you just don't feel the need to mark a lunar connection at all.

*Research Suggestion:* Consult a lunar calendar and mark out the cycle over the next month in a journal, datebook, or notepad. Twice a day—upon waking up and before you go to bed—write down a word or phrase that describes how you are feeling (calm, anxious, stressed, depressed, excited, etc.). Once you reach the end of the first month, look back and see if you notice any correlations between the phase of the moon and how you felt at that time. It may take several months to start noticing a larger pattern.

### *The Solar Seasons*

Moving outside of your body's schedule and the daily requirements of work, friends, and family and past the effects of the lunar month, we come to the solar seasons. The solar season, as the name implies, is directly determined by the proximity of the earth's elliptical orbit to the sun over the course of a year. For locations north and south of the equator, the solstices mark the longest and shortest days (nights (when the earth is closest and farthest from the sun), and the equinoxes in between them mark when day and night are equal. Due to the tilt of the earth's axis, while those in the Northern Hemisphere observe the Winter Solstice, those in the Southern Hemisphere are celebrating the Summer Solstice.

Early humanity recognized the correlation of the apparent movement of the sun and other celestial bodies with the changing of the seasons. Many ancient monoliths, earthen humanmade mounds, and other structures accurately mark the solstices and equinoxes. Many festivals across the planet have been scheduled according to these solar occurrences for thousands of years.

Since the changing of the seasons repeats in a relatively reliable cycle,[11] with definitive "spokes," the solar season can be imagined as a wheel. The term *Wheel of the Year* is prevalent in modern Paganism to describe a repeating circle of sabbats, or celebrations. The Wheel of the Year has become a commonly accepted schedule in the last several decades, but it's hardly ancient or applicable for all regions and practices. Where did it come from? Some point to the late 1950s when two older British men were hanging out at their naturist (nudist) club, comparing notes on their burgeoning spiritual paths. Between them, they realized they had a nice sort of evenly spaced schedule of sabbats, or festivals—all they had to do was embellish or recreate some practices and they had an eight-spoked wheel of sacred days. Brilliant! Those two men were Gerald Gardner (the father of modern Wicca) and Ross Nichols (the founder of the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids, or OBOD).

The Wheel of the Year was eagerly embraced early on for several reasons. First, most people were under the impression that Wicca, Druidry, and similar paths were ancient in origin instead of recently and largely constructed (with good intentions). Second, people love a festival, and eight sure beats the traditional Christian big two of Easter (the Sunday following the first full moon that occurs after the Spring Equinox) and Christmas (close proximity to the Winter Solstice). And, what luck! The sabbats actually can overlap those nicely, so everyone can celebrate something together.

The Wheel of the Year is made up of the four solstices and equinoxes and the four cross-quarter days of Celtic origin spaced between them. As I mentioned earlier, celebration and marking of the solstices can be found around the world, in modern and ancient times. The

11. Aside from the more frequently occurring anomalies caused by global warming.

Wheel of the Year has the Winter Solstice (or Yule), Imbolc (or Candlemas), the Spring Equinox (or Ostara), Beltane (or Walpurgisnacht), the Summer Solstice (or Litha), Lugnassadh (or Lammas), the Fall Equinox (or Mabon), and Samhain (or Halloween). The names for these days come from a variety of sources, cobbled from a mix of Celtic, Christian, Germanic, Norse, and other systems.

In recent years, folks have started to go, "Hey, wait a minute. Where did that name come from and how does that correlate with my practice?" The sabbats tend to be associated with agricultural observances, so depending on where you live and how the seasons occur there (if they do at all), the sabbats may feel disconnected to you. The Celtic, German, or Christian names for these dates also may not make sense to you if you come from a different background. Additionally, since the seasons in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres are flipped, the Wheel of the Year cannot be observed universally, like the standard calendar year. Last but not least, the focus on the spokes tends to get people in the frame of mind of observing a single day rather than looking at the larger picture of a season. Aside from the astronomically precise moments of the solstices and equinoxes (which can occur anywhere from the 19th to the 23rd day of their given months of June and December, March and September, respectively), the points on any solar wheel are more about marking the space *in between* the spokes. Realistically, the Wheel of the Year is not a terrible idea, but I think it works best as an inspirational guideline.

Other complications related to following the Wheel of the Year arise if you just can't find yourself following an agriculturally based system or don't feel included, with the recurring, often heterosexually focused fertility themes. Keep in mind that not everything has to focus on physical fertility of the plants, animals, and the continuation of humanity physically. If you have a hard time feeling personally connected to the sabbats, try a different perspective. Instead of field crops or literal fertility, ponder the inner symbolism of the sabbat for yourself: What do you wish to bring forth in yourself? What do you wish to grow in your home, your community, and your country? Whom do you support and

who supports you? How would you change where you're at right now? What do you wish to leave behind? What would give you new inspiration and invigorate your life? Does the sabbat call for cleansing, purification, fostering, harvesting, balance, etc.? Relate that back to your own life and needs and you may find new meaning.

> *Research Suggestion:* Starting with the equinoxes and solstices, consider how these solar events impact your life, whether seasonally, spiritually, mentally, etc. Then look at the cross-quarter days and other solar-oriented festivals. Do you feel like they have a place in your practice? Why or why not?

### *Schedule of Feast Days*

Not all special occasions have to do with marking the seasons or recognizing solar events. Birthdays, death days, and anniversaries all honor certain dates that have meaning in our lives. A feast day can be in celebration or memory of someone in your life or family, or it could commemorate someone you admire, respect, or are inspired by. (If they are deceased, they are often referred to as the "Mighty Dead.") Perhaps a deity or spirit you work with has a specific historic date on the calendar reserved for them. These various kinds of observances do tend to focus on a specific day, marking a significant date or moment in history, and involve some sort of action of acknowledgment. The ritual treatment can be as simple as setting up a special altar (if you don't already have a permanent one) and lighting a candle, or it could be complex as a large gathering, complete with feasting and elaborate rituals.

Sometimes a certain day will have a multitude of overlapping occurrences, creating an interesting effect of layered meaning. For example, I share my birthday with Gerald Gardner, which has caused me to have an interesting relationship with his work and memory. It is also the feast day of St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost things. Coming from a Sicilian/Italian Catholic background, I have a soft spot for him, and oddly I have quite the knack for locating lost items for people. Other special days for me include my wedding anniversary and the birthdays of my maternal grandparents, who have both passed on.

A remarkable, significant, or unusual event in your life may spawn a new day of devotion. For example, let's say someone is battling an illness like cancer and petitions a spirit or deity for aid. On the day they get a clean bill of health, they may decide that every year after on that date, they will perform a ritual of thanksgiving. Or maybe you're working with a certain deity and want to give them a feast day but can't find a historic date on record for them. You might use a system of divination to determine what date works best and build upon that. Or you may remember the month or actual date you first encountered them and make that the feast day for your practice.

Another way of considering meaningful celebrations is by looking around you. The place where you live may celebrate certain days by holding events and festivals. As you'll see in the "Environment" section later in this chapter, where you live greatly influences your practice. From Mardi Gras in New Orleans to the Mummers Parade in Philadelphia and the Okra Strut Festival in Irmo, South Carolina, people in cities and towns the world over love a celebration. Many of these events have deeper roots worth exploring.

*Research Suggestion:* Consider what dates, people, events, spirits, and/or deities are important in your life. If you feel the need to honor them in some way, write them down in a list, noting dates and what form of observation you believe is appropriate. Be sure to look for inspiration in your hometown as well.

## Turning the Wheel of You

I encourage you to craft your own wheel. You may like the construction of the Wheel of the Year, or you may find it has too few or too many days that don't make sense for you. If you have only two or three real seasons where you live, then marking those times will feel more important than a set of four. If the solstices and equinoxes are really powerful symbolically for you, then those can be essential for developing your practice.

Once you have researched your roots, you may also discover different names and variations that describe the solar seasons better for you

than the modernly assigned ones. In terms of inspiration, is there a time of year that is most important to you? For example, if you feel more connected emotionally and mentally to fall, then the celebration of it will have more significance to you. You may also want to figure out special ways to mark that season throughout it, versus acknowledging just one date. One point that is rarely made is that not everything has to be given the same amount of weight or importance. You can also experiment if you're unsure how you feel about a certain point on the wheel. Try some traditional methods and make note of what happens during and after them. Don't be afraid of changing, adding, or removing points as your practice evolves. As time goes by or if you move to a different place, you may find your relationship to the seasons changing drastically. This is completely natural.

If you're unsure where to start, I recommend using the Wheel of the Year for beginning inspiration. Create a timeline and evaluate the sabbats and their meanings and relevance to you and how you would observe them. Overlay them with the actual seasonal timeline of where you live. Do they make sense for you? Mark the ones that have the greatest significance to you. Incorporate your roots and time research if you found celebrations that appeal to you, and see where and how they can fit in. When you look at the overall chart, is there a sense of flow to it that reflects your needs and acknowledges what is happening around you?

To give you an example, this is currently what my personal wheel is like. Since wheels do not have a definitive start and end, I don't have a beginning or finish to my year. Besides the traditional calendar year, there is not a specific time that I recognize as my "new year." I tend not to hold some sort of ritual to observe a specific changing of the season unless I feel called to.

**Winter Solstice:** The transition from the longest night of the year to the beginning of the returning of the light is psychologically very powerful to me. Since we're often home at this time (versus the rest of the year, when we're often traveling on the road), it is definitely a time of fellowship, reconnecting, gathering, feasting with friends,

and decorating with lights. I focus on making our home aromatically welcoming with simmer pots.[12]

**The Wild Hunt and Imbolc:** From the Winter Solstice onward, I focus on clearing out clutter, physically and metaphysically. Health and emotional well-being are especially attended to. The clearing and preparation help me focus on what I want to have take root and grow in the spring.

**Spring Equinox to Beltane:** I don't celebrate the day of the Spring Equinox, but I use this time of year to begin new projects and work outside, preparing the gardens as the weather permits.

**Beltane/Walpurgisnacht to the Summer Solstice:** I have a long-standing tradition of celebrating May Day in some significant way. There is definitely a special spark to the energy that is excellent for ritual workings and divination. The energy push during this time period is for manifestation and progressive growth. I don't focus too closely on the Summer Solstice because in the back of my head I know the days are slowly going to get darker. I try to absorb as much daylight as possible.

**Summer onward to the Fall Equinox:** I exercise caution in August and conserve energy. The combination of heat and the slow compression of days tends to bring about an uptick in recklessness, violence, and natural disasters.

**Autumn to Samhain:** Fall is a special time of year for me. I feel a second wave of awakening and invigoration. I am likely to attend other folks' rituals and gatherings, as well as focus on the gardens, preparing them for winter.

**Samhain to the Winter Solstice:** For me this is a time of remembering and honoring the deceased, and working with root energy and what lies beneath. I am often involved in both leading and attending rituals to facilitate change.

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12. See pages 224–226 of *The Witch's Cauldron* for recipes.

**Feast Day: Hekate Night (November 16):** On this day I perform a personal ritual to honor Hekate.

## Environment: The World Around You

Another equally important part of crafting your path is the location where you live. Far too many people have placed more importance on the places where their blood came from and not given enough attention to the land upon which they actually live now. This oversight breeds a profound sense of disconnect that is the antithesis of Witchcraft. Pushing that origin precedence is like trying to make the proverbial square peg fit in a round hole. The environment is a cauldron in which the ingredients of roots, inspiration, and time all get mixed in, giving your practice form and providing a place for it.

I was born and grew up in the Delaware Valley of Philadelphia and have lived in Columbia, South Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; the Bay Area of California; and Seattle, Washington. I have toured extensively throughout the United States for the last decade, and mainly through work have traveled to England, Germany, Greece, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Mexico, and Costa Rica. Every single place I have visited has had an energy of its very own. There is the land itself, the bodies of water that may surround it, and the weather patterns that shape the land, flora, and fauna, as well as what gets built upon the land and who makes their home there. In the span of only a few miles, the nature and feel of the land can shift dramatically.

That spirit or personality of the land is often referred to as the *genius loci*. You will find other names for it in mythology and folklore from all over the world. Whether you recognize the genius loci as a distinct individual spirit of place or a larger, more vague sense of energy present in the land around you, it can have a profound effect on your practice. There are the latitude and longitude coordinates that have a hand in determining climate. Location determines how the solar season will affect the land and its inhabitants—including you. The temperatures and seasonal changes in turn affect the flora and fauna, which are directly influenced by the landscape and vice versa. Every landscape has unique characteristics: the kinds of soil and rocks that make up its bones and

the plants and animals that live upon and within it, forming its skin and blood.

How does your environment factor into how you practice? Temperature and humidity may determine whether you conduct rituals and other work, indoors or out. If you're working with plants (whether you are growing your own or wildcrafting), what you can grow or find at a beach or in a desert will vary greatly from what you can gather from a rainforest or an alpine meadow.

Similarly, the kinds of animals and insects you encounter in the city will probably be very different from the ones that make their home thirty miles away in the deep woods. In the city, you will have humanmade monoliths and structures that give a distinct flavor to the energy of the land in a much different way than boulders left behind by glaciers do.

Look at where you live. Where are you physically located? What is the land like? Is it flat or mountainous or somewhere in between? What are the major bodies of water around you (streams, rivers, lakes, seas, oceans, etc.)? What is the habitat and nature of the plant and animal life around you (desert, tropical, open plains, marshland, temperate, beach, jungle, alpine forest, etc.)? Are you in the city or the suburbs or far away from civilization? There's nothing more powerful and engaging than to connect to the land you actually live on, and even the concrete jungle has its own spirit and energy to it. Take time to connect to it, to identify the flow of the seasons, the plants, the animals, and the people. It's so much easier to be in tune with the hum of the land where you live. This means that if you move to different places, your practice will change accordingly to reflect the nature of where you live, but the places where you have lived previously will continue to influence you as well in the form of tools and inspiration.

> *Research Suggestion:* Evaluate your local landscape, identifying natural and humanmade landmarks. What are the major geological features that surround you (north, east, west, south, and center)? Familiarize yourself with the local flora and fauna as well as the changing of the weather and its effects.

## Star: Illuminating Your Path

The fifth element of RITES is the star. If we have gathered roots, inspiration, and time in the cauldron of environment, the star is the guiding principles that invigorate our brew and transform it into a functioning path of Witchcraft. You could look at the star as your compass and formula for your code of ethics. I am not going to feed you some sort of scary-sounding mandate about how you should or shouldn't behave. My best words of wisdom in this department are to *be responsible*—and to remind you of the three keys from chapter 1: know thyself, maintain balance, and accept responsibility. In Modern Traditional Witchcraft, there is no rede, no central code of morality or ethics. Instead, we have an understanding that all of our actions have a multitude of reactions, with both positive and negative interpretations subject to one's perspective.

So we must consider our words and actions and the effects we can perceive them to have, then take action and accept responsibility for all that we can perceive—as well as those we can't. Balance is always shifting. Sometimes it calls for extreme action, and other times it requires minute, delicate adjustments.

The thing is, the star isn't some outside influence, some guiding spirit sitting on your shoulder. It's *you*: your internal guidance system. The star is the motor that keeps you running, so it's up to you to do the maintenance and problem solving. There is no one else to blame, which means you have to be very honest with yourself if you wish to follow the path of the Witch. You have to take into account your strengths and weaknesses. Are you looking to be a practitioner forging ahead on your own, or are you better off as a participant following along? Who or what are you seeking power over?

Being a Witch means being realistic about who you are, who you've been up until this point, and where you want to go. You need to acknowledge both your talents and your failures and always be willing to learn more. See Witchcraft as part of everything you do, versus something that's a side compartment, a hobby, or an attempt to avoid reality. This path is never the easy way out, and it spits out the lazy. Witchcraft demands that you be honest with yourself, your practice, and your calling.

Another important thing to remember for your star is the element of change, which is the pulse of Witchcraft. Be ever thinking, always considering, fluid and growing. Think outside the box, beyond the books, and exercise critical thinking. The Witch doesn't assume; the Witch knows. Evaluate your path and your ideas regularly. Things we believe at one point in our lives may not work later on, and vice versa. Discard what is unneeded and strengthen what works. If you are flexible enough to respond to the world around you, then you will be actively practicing and working. Sometimes we are the rock and sometimes we are the water that swirls around the rock—and often we are both.

## A Witch's Manifesto

I struggled a bit with the title for this section. Is *manifesto* the word needed? What do you call a collection of goals and aspirations for a personal path with the hope that it will influence and guide the larger culture? Who am I to issue a list of commandments or rules? That's not my intention. I must confess that I have tended to connect *manifesto* with fervent young adults passing out their xeroxed visions in goth clubs. But *manifest* is right there in the word—to make something known, to give it form, to bring it into being.

I look at the churning, bubbling cauldron that the world is right now with quite a mixture of thoughts and feelings. I can't shake the feeling that we're on the verge of a massive breakdown and cultural collapse. But I also feel there are immense possibilities in store for a new Époque of Emergence—with greater understanding, compassion, and luminous vision. I have great hope, but at the same time, humanity's been at this game for centuries. We have done worse and we have done better. A fresh start doesn't guarantee success.

Then I remember that we're all here now. These are the times we were made for. There is a resurgence in Witchcraft in the midst of all of this turmoil. We are here to help with the shifting, changing, and reforming of reality. So I am sharing with you this list of possibilities and ideas ripe for manifestation. These are things that should apply to all people, but I feel Witches should help lead the way. You may find them to be made of star-stuff.

**All bodies are autonomous.** If we wish to be respected, we must respect both ourselves and others, regardless of color, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, etc. Respect includes acknowledging a person's right to live their life and make healthy choices. Respect does not include violating others' rights through our actions or words.

**The Other is us.** We are all "other" to someone else. We all have our tribes, and then there are those outside of it. To recognize that the mirror works both ways is a bridge to understanding that we are all not so different fundamentally.

**All actions are an exchange of energy.** Everything we do involves movement in some way. We can exchange energy in a reciprocal manner (giving to those who give to us) or pass the energy along in a daisy chain (receiving and giving down the line). The circle of life (birth, life, death, rebirth) is a constant exchange of energy.

**No one is entitled.** We are not owed anything by the world, regardless of who we are, where we come from, or what we have done.

**We are connected to the world.** We are not separate from the land, the environment, the planet, the universe. We belong to it; it does not belong to us. We are made of the same particles. We must conserve and protect our natural resources. We must participate in the cycle of life and death in a way that is mindful and honoring of plants, animals, and all things—consuming and disposing of them with honor.

**We are responsible for our personal power.** Our power comes from within and recognizing it for ourselves. From there, it is our duty to learn, guide, observe, listen, act, and do what we can to help others as well.

**Life is a collection of points, not one definitive mark.** Part of being human is making mistakes, learning from them, and granting opportunities for change. If we shame or punish without granting an opportunity for change and redirection, then we fail to respect ourselves and others.

**You are the summary of your words and deeds.** The measure of who you are is expressly defined by what you do and say and how you do it. Act with integrity and grace, and you will always act with true power.

## Choosing Your Threads

Now that we've covered RITES, we're going to look at some important areas that are often points of confusion. You may be wondering what tools you may or may not need, whether you should work by yourself or with a group, and whether you should do a rite of initiation or dedication. We'll touch once more on the importance of myth and how it can guide us. These areas are like choosing the color and texture of the threads before sitting down in front of the loom. After you have gotten these threads properly aligned, you'll be ready to get down to weaving them together in the pattern that is the Witch's Craft.

## Reconsidering Tools and Aids

Often there is a tendency for folks to go, "Okay, I want to be a Witch. What tools do I need to buy in order to do Witchcraft?" Since you're reading this book, I'm going to assume you're a living, physically embodied being, which means you've already got all the tools you need already on you (yes, even if you're reading this book while completely naked). Your mind, your breath, your heart, your hands, your feet—everything that is part of your body makes up your essential tools. Technically you don't have to buy or collect a single thing to work magick, perform a ritual, or speak with gods and spirits.

That said, we sure do like things. Witches especially seem to have an affinity for shiny things and collecting stuff, much like our friends in the corvid family: crows, ravens, magpies, rooks, and jays. Similarly, these birds also utilize both tools and strategy to achieve their needs. Tools can be wonderful aids in helping us accomplish certain tasks, but they don't necessarily make the Witch (or the bird). So if anyone tells you that you *must* have a wand or an athame or even a cauldron to be a "real" Witch, you have my permission to roll your eyes at them (not that you need my permission).

Tools are designed to assist us. The ability to use them comes from within us, not them. A wand can help you direct energy, but it is not where the power resides. A fancy handcrafted ritual blade can be a very beautiful thing, but investing in a good kitchen knife is a better move if cooking is how you do your work best. A pasta pot or saucepan may not look the traditional part, but it can just as easily work as a cauldron. A stang is a truly glorious and impressive thing, but if you live and work in the middle of a concrete city, there won't be much opportunity to use it. A giant leather-bound book makes for a fantastic-looking grimoire, but it may not be the best thing to take out into the field with you to make notes. If the majority of the work you do involves plants, then having a trusty pair of gloves or a trowel that you can count on is worth more than some shiny crystals. That smooth rock with the hole in it that you found on the beach and fits perfectly in your hands will have more meaning than one you could buy.

Regardless of how you acquire them, your tools do not have to match the picture books. But they *do* need to fit the form and function of your needs! The majority of fancy tools that get featured in books on Witchcraft and Wicca tend to be more of a symbolic or ritual nature, drawing from a background of ceremonial and theatrical magic. They're really not meant for getting down and dirty in the kitchen, garden, or studio. I'm not saying you shouldn't have them or can't use them on occasion. I love collecting beautiful ritual tools and paraphernalia, but they are *objets d'art* more than anything else.

The same is true of nontraditional methods of helping you focus and get to work. While there are an array of New Age practices that often get wrapped up in Witchcraft, you don't have to be a yogi or a reiki master as well as a Witch (unless those things interest you). For some people, all it takes is a hot cup of tea or coffee to get them ready, while for others it's that shower first thing in the morning or a bath after work. Some people get in the mood by listening to heavy metal, while others invigorate their bodies with some form of dance. These creature comforts help to connect us with our bodies. Trust that you know what works best for you—or if you don't know, follow your inspiration and explore methods that pique your interest.

Consider which "unconventional" tools and aids you use that help you get things done. Maybe you have a favorite pen for writing or drawing, a go-to kitchen knife or a mortar and pestle for tackling herbs, or the beat-up drum you can take anywhere with you and get a great sound out of it. Maybe there's a necklace or bracelet that you put on before leaving the house or starting a working. Think about what guides and informs you, making you feel confident and connected. Is that something part of your daily ritual, or does it hold special meaning for you? Asking yourself these questions will help you figure out what tools you need—or most likely already have.

## Practicing Alone or Working in Groups

There is occasionally a stigma implied that a Witch who practices alone somehow isn't as effective as one who is part of a coven. Sometimes that stigma is self-applied by the practitioner who hasn't been able to join a group (usually due to being isolated in some way), and they feel that surely they're somehow inadequate. Really, it all comes down to the person. I have met incredibly powerful Witches who practice mainly on their own, and I have met some really incompetent ones who have been long-term members of covens. I am not convinced that the coven is the natural organization of the Witch. To figure out what that means, as well as what may be right for you, let's explore the nature of the Witch a bit.

The earliest Witches were those tapped to work directly with the realm of spirits. If we consider the possibilities hidden within cave paintings around the world, then we've been around for a long, long time. Be it gut instinct or the result of reading too many novels about prehistoric humanity, I get the feeling that even in close-quarter tribal living situations, the Witch probably occupied their own nook in the far back of the proverbial cave or forest.

Why? Working with spirits and deity alters you—or, as some would say, perhaps we're differently wired from the start, which is why we do what we do. Although we may do a lot of work for the good of the community, that doesn't necessarily mean we're social creatures by nature. We're already keeping a lot of company as it is, even if you can't see them. Adding more people to the mix can get exhausting very quickly.

Space, distance, and solitude provide mental and spiritual sanctity. But the communal distance isn't just for the benefit of the Witch—most people are not comfortable with the concept of the Other, of spirits, gods, visions, and liminal spaces. They may respect it, be in awe of it, or even worship it, but they're really just totes fine with it staying over there—along with the Witch.

Which brings me to the sticky topic of covens and what I feel is their somewhat unnatural nature. Before anybody has a conniption and spills wax on their cloak, I do understand that the coven structure is something that works for many. And as always, if it works for you, that's wonderful. But I'm going to unravel why, in a long-term historical context, they don't quite make sense to me.

In every society there is a certain order to things that can be seen in a repeating pattern for thousands of years all over the planet. You have those who work directly with the sacred/spiritual (priests, clergy, shamans, Witches, etc.), and then there is the rest of the community, who in varying degrees follow the beliefs and rules of the divine while going about their own business. They acknowledge the divine through various protocol, festivals, and rituals outlined by the clergy, while the latter deal directly with the spiritual realm—on their own, in temples, in sanctuaries, and in other places apart from the rest of society.

In various "witch-cult" theories, the idea is that pre-Christian beliefs had to go underground to survive, and covens were a way to keep the old gods alive. Other theories and systems believe that Christianity just got layered on top of the older practices and were practiced in covens or families. Either can make sense (and there are varying degrees of evidence supporting both, depending on who you ask), but where it gets a bit strange for me is the idea that everyone in the coven was a priest/priestess kind of Witch. That's a lot of cooks for one cauldron (in a regular, daily sense).

If you consider the Witch in a professional sense, it's highly unlikely that there were a slew of them in one area—just like there wouldn't have been six shoemakers for a village of two hundred people, or nine blacksmiths. Add to the mix the reality that professionals of all kinds

have very specific ways of doing their thing in their own way. They rarely combine forces unless the population or space requires it.

What I can see happening is a *convening* of Witches—or, in more modern terms, a *convention*—where Witches would travel to a certain location on a yearly or so basis to talk trade, exchange wisdom, and perhaps take care of some big issues by working together. (I doubt they had badges and ribbons, but perhaps they did have guests of honor, and I'm sure late-night room parties were probably part of the deal. I wonder if they covered travel expenses.)

And then they returned to where they lived, most likely alone, on the edge of the community (or, as some say, hedge). There, the Witch would continue to serve the needs of their area, working with the Other on their own terms—regardless of whether their services fit the currently acceptable communal spiritual context of society. Even if the town didn't openly worship or claim to believe in the Other, they still respected it—and in many cases feared the unknown and unseen. If anything, the continuation of Witches throughout time has hedged on one major factor: we are the problem solvers. When humanity has been at its least educated or most oppressed, thwarted by greater forces, the Witch has been there. We heal, we charm, we cleanse, and we deal with the darker side of things as well. We get shit done (which is often a problematic thing for those in positions of authority).

We Witches do like our hedges, our little corners in the backs of caves, our cottages at the edge of the woods and civilization. We cherish our peace and quiet, and our autonomy. But we do know (or at least should know) when it's time to combine forces, to convene, to raise energy together; to put aside differences and variations for the greater good. Even if we're each doing it from our own little corner, it can have an impact. For sometimes edges are made of blades, and those blades are sharp enough to cut through the most troubling of times—that is, if we give ourselves the power to wield them.

So in summary, Witches can work in groups or alone. If you do choose to work in a group, I recommend finding people who are like-minded, with a temperament that complements yours. Mutual respect is an absolute necessity. If it's a mixed group of solitaries working to-

gether occasionally, then everyone should be on equal footing. If you're entering a kind of mentorship where you are learning a tradition from someone else, there should still be a sense of mutual respect, but you will be expected to follow their rules until you have "graduated."

## Do You Need a Teacher?

Once I was teaching "The Authentic Witch: Crafting a Working Tradition" at my local Pagan Pride Day, and luckily we had some time for questions. One of those questions was "So do I even need to find a teacher in the Craft?" Part of what I love about this question is that it came from a mature adult who was taking lots of notes. Why does that matter? This particular workshop always draws a wide mix of people: young people just starting out as well as older folks who may be coming late to this path, or perhaps they've done years of other systems and still haven't found exactly what they're looking for. My read on this person was that they had been working on trying to figure out the answer for a while.

There are a couple ways of looking at this question. One is to ask, Are you looking to follow a specific tradition? Then yes, it would behoove you to find a teacher of that tradition to study with. The same is true for learning skills and technical crafts. For example, do you want to be an herbalist? Then you need to study with an herbalist (or, ideally, multiple herbalists, over time). Reading about it in a book isn't going to give you the hands-on experience necessary, and you'll want to be constantly updating your skills and knowledge over the years as well.

Another way to answer this question is a bit more elusive and less obvious. It involves abandoning the formal academic idea of the teacher-student relationship—and taking on a Witch's perspective. That viewpoint is that the whole world is our teacher, if we're paying close enough attention. Sometimes we enter into formal agreements, and the rest of the time we're sloshing up against everything like jellyfish. The best kind of learning isn't a one-way dictation or write and repeat, but rather an immersive experience.

I have a hard time seeing Witchcraft as something you learn in a set time frame: a year and a day, three years and three days, via a certification

course, etc. I believe the same is true for dance and art. You can complete a course, but does that mean you really know what you're doing? The course offers guidance and maybe a paper reward, but that doesn't put someone above or below a person who chooses a different approach. Dance, painting, witchery—these things all require living experience in order to understand them, to truly be skilled and artful at them. The classroom format can definitely lend a sense of order and validation, but it's just one way to learn.

Surrounding this topic, I am reminded of some advice I received nearly twenty years ago from very different sources:

(1) "Sure, you can go to grad school, but the world is a greater classroom." I received this information from two teachers I had in college—who are both still present in my life today, long past that initial student-teacher relationship. One taught art and design, and the other history and language, with esoteric framing. I have yet to regret not going to grad school, and I can see the fortune of the life experience that has informed my art and practice. If I wish to learn another form of art, a technique of some sort, I can go and study that technique specifically, but there are a variety of options I can choose: apprenticeship, adult education classes, special programs, etc.

(2) "You can learn something from every dancer. Sometimes it's what to do, and sometimes it's what *not* to do." I was given this unsolicited advice in a parking lot outside a restaurant. I had just seen a couple of bellydancers perform live for the very first time and was asked my opinion of them. Since I had been taking dance classes for only a few months at that point, I had been mesmerized by the beauty of both dancers—how they moved, the shiny, glitzy goodness of their costumes, the way they commanded the room. I was in love! I couldn't wait to be like them.

That advice came from a more established dancer who was not my peer nor my teacher—and was not known for their tact either, I would discover later. Their words were jarring to my reverie of the moment, but in time I would understand what they meant. The advice also applies to more than just dance. We can learn something from every per-

son we encounter, observing what works or what doesn't work, and choosing what is best for our own path.

In retrospect, there was more to that moment than just those words. There is nothing wrong with falling in love with something. No, we're not going to see the warts and all right away, but it draws our attention and gives us new focus. Nor is it our job to harsh anyone else's high just because we've already seen it. We all figure it out at our own pace, and sometimes we learn the hard way too. We all have different needs, different ways of learning.

The universe has many ways of teaching us. There is the way the ocean teaches us, in the flow and pull of its waves, about the dangers of overestimating its power and our own footing, how the water easily gives and takes. There are the lessons of the trees: the cycles of blossoming, covering, and shedding, the patience of slow growth, and the interconnectivity of their roots and branches with other beings around them. There is the way that fire gives light and warmth but is also all-consuming—and how it dies without breath. There is also the whispering of the spirits and ancestors in our dreams and in our bones. Then there are the people in our lives—those we are born into, those we choose, and those we flow with and against.

So if you feel comfortable with an academic approach, there's nothing wrong with that. Just realize it's just one approach, and to get more in depth you're going to need to get out "in the field" beyond that. Truly, you will never stop learning—as long as you're open to seeing that everything is as an opportunity to learn, grow, and challenge ourselves.

So do you need a teacher in the Craft? Yes, you do. Many, in fact. But you don't necessarily need to study with a certified Witch to become one. Open your eyes and heart—the teachers are all around you.

## Initiation and Dedication

Do you need to be initiated to become a Witch? Can you initiate or dedicate yourself to your path? As I mentioned in the previous section and in chapter 2 in "Natural Witch vs. Made Witch," if you're looking to become part of a specific established tradition, then yes, generally there will be some sort of formal initiation. But what is initiation?

Technically it is the formal admission or acceptance into a group or a rite or ceremony of admission. It symbolically bestows a title or brand on you, marking you as one of the group. However, the initiation into any group isn't what makes you a Witch—it's the path of study and working on your practice that does. The initiation is the process of acknowledging that you actively sought this path and have endeavored to achieve it successfully.

Then there is initiation by spirit, which is more akin to opening a gateway or font of knowledge than joining a group. This type of initiation happens in dreams or a trance state. Unlike the formal initiation of a tradition, the one by spirit might not be one you were looking for. You could be working on your own, then suddenly you start having these dreams of your favorite late aunt passing on tidbits of information that you remember upon waking. Suddenly you know and understand things you didn't before and have a different kind of sight. This experience is an example of initiation of spirit—it's often spontaneous and takes place in the realm of the liminal. The spirit could be your actual aunt or it could be a deity or other spirit taking that form to aid you. It's a very personal experience that can feel awkward to explain, as special as it may be. Some might say the formal group initiation is like being enrolled at a private school, while the initiation by spirit is like homeschooling. But frankly, if they both get the Witch to where they need to be in their practice, then they are equally valid.

But even if you're not looking to join a group, there's often a desire to feel recognized or validated in some way that feels formalized. It's a very human, very natural thing to do. I can tell you to suck it up and own being a Witch for yourself, but that's not very helpful, is it?

Instead, I'm going to suggest some things you can do that will help you feel like things are indeed set in motion. One option is devising a rite of dedication. Dedication means that you are making a formal declaration that signifies your complete and wholehearted devotion to the path of the Witch. Another thing to consider is that if you're going through this book with other people, you can do a ritual of initiation where you witness each other's intent to follow your own path.

In devising a rite of initiation or dedication, consider what you are looking to accomplish. Is there a certain symbol or object that seems important or most relevant for what you wish to do? Most people choose to perform some sort of ritual in order to feel that they are marking a new point in their lives. An initiation is a promise to unlock the mysteries within you so that you can be more connected and in tune with the world around you. This rite could involve the lighting of a new white candle, the anointing of a special oil upon the body, and/or the blessing of a new piece of jewelry. A dedication can involve forming an agreement with ancestors, spirits, or deities to follow a certain path, exchanging work and focus for wisdom and guidance. If you're focusing on herbalism, then the ritual might include the consecrating of special working tools, like a boline, in honor of the agreement. Follow your intuition here, but we'll talk more about ritual in the next chapter.

## The Truth of Myth

Much of the RITES process asks you to consider myth and folklore. We tend to think of myth as something that was forged long ago—and has remained static throughout time. But myths are fluid, changing with the cultures that tell them, constantly being created and recreated. Our ancestors edited and altered myths per their experiences. They eliminated or added characters, empowering or minimizing certain aspects, changing, adding, or erasing details to fit their modern-day narrative.

Similarly, some people may equate myths with fiction, but all myths have a root in reality. They explain our relationship with the universe, both the natural and the unnatural world around us—from creation and the nuances of life to the mysteries of death. Mythology imparts to us history, morals, ethics, protocol, and viewpoints.

Myths are forged in the heart of storytelling, the mind and body of defining and forming culture, and in the spirit of imagination. They are stories not just of the gods, such as "Persephone's Journey to the Underworld" or "Coyote Brings Fire to the People," but of the rise and fall of religions, cultures, governments, and plain old human beings as well. These are all myths:

- Your great-great-grandfather's trek to the New World and building a new legacy for his descendants in Pittsburgh
- Gerald Gardner's founding of Wicca (or the origin story and resulting legacy of any prominent occultist)
- Your interaction with that rude person in the grocery store yesterday that got applause from your fellow shoppers, which you posted on social media
- The surprising and uplifting encounter your friend just had with someone on the subway, which they called and told you about

These all combine elements of truth and real experiences, rolled up into something that is passed on verbally or in printed form. We take in details through all of our senses, and our minds unconsciously form versions of what we experience. That means that the person sitting next to us could see the same scene play out and remember it in a completely different way. Others purposely manipulate myths to recreate experiences in their own memories. Sometimes it's done with the best of intentions, and sometimes it's forged under a veil of manipulation.

It is vital that we are constantly investigating and reconsidering not only the myths of ancient times but also those of the generation ahead of us and that of those behind us. Persephone's story can indeed change in meaning and relevance depending on how our own lives go. How you saw the myth when you were eight should be different from when you were 16, 32, 48,or 70—because of your own experiences.

Similarly, as history uncovers new facts and other variations of myths, we must allow ourselves to be fluid enough to move with the myth, to see and accept (or reject) new versions of it. We should question what we think and what we believe—and why we think and believe that way.

For example, so much information has been brought to light about how Wicca as a religion came to be (and continues to come into being via Ronald Hutton, letters from Doreen Valiente, conjecture on Margaret Murray's work, etc.) and similar P-word paths claiming long lineages and fantastic associations with occult celebrities—yet some folks

are attached to the idea of it being "the ancient ways" despite the proof or logic. Over the last several decades, that connection to pre-Christian times gave a sense of validation and history to a budding movement.

But we know that age doesn't grant validity to a path—practice does. It doesn't matter how recently your spiritual path got pinned on the map or how it compares to someone else's; what matters is that it works for you. Ask yourself, What does the myth do for you? What do you lose in releasing it? And what are the myths that society is feeding you right now?

Myth isn't about the accurate representation of actual events backed up by original source materials. Mythology is designed to feed into our imagination, to inspire us, to explain the world in metaphor, to teach us ideas and concepts, and to entertain us, and at the root of all myth is the seed of truth. But truth doesn't always mean "fact." Truth is subjective; it's a given perspective of an idea. It touches upon reality for a brief moment and then departs from there.

We're supposed to know and understand that myths are steeped in metaphor. Relative age or newness has nothing to do with the power of a myth. Consider Neil Gaiman's *American Gods,* Monica Furlong's *Juniper,* Charles de Lint's *Moonheart,* or Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume,* purely fictional modern books that so eloquently provide insight into the divine and magic and our relationships with them. (They are also recommended reading.)

The point of myth is to inspire us to find our own truths and craft our own stories, build our own myths and practices, and give us principles to use as a guide. And that, dear folks, is no fiction.

## Age, Experience, Secrets, and the Fear of Missing Out

In this section I want to talk about some common issues that seekers often encounter when starting on their paths. There is the factor of age, relative experience, the natural progression of learning, the fascination (or obsession) with secrets and mysteries, and the fear that you might be missing out on something wonderful. All of these things are common,

but you may feel deceptively alone as you experience them. A combination of them might make you feel pressured to make choices that may lead to more confusion than clarity. My goal here is to put your mind at ease and prepare you as well.

When I was much younger and finding my way on the path, I felt that surely there were secrets to be uncovered, protected by the initiated and handed out to the worthy; that if I found the right mystery, tradition, or gatekeeper, all the knowledge would be revealed.

Now? I believe that there are no secrets, but only revelations. That isn't to say there aren't any mysteries and that all of the answers are out there in plain sight. Rather, we learn things as we're ready to receive them, and no one person or path has all the answers.

Growing up, we tend to think of our parents as infallible and believe they must know everything. But as we become adults ourselves, we realize that they are human, just like us. That means they can be equally as wrong as they are right, depending upon their experiences and choices. The same is true of an "elder" of any path or tradition. They are not all-knowing or always right. But it is important—with our parents as well as our elders—to give respect where it is deserved. And a true elder (as with a good parent) fosters relationships that allow respect to flow in both directions. What does that mean and look like?

In both dance and Witchcraft classes, I often talk about the stages of growth I've observed:

- *The Neophyte/Beginner:* Eager to learn everything, freely admits they know nothing
- *The Acolyte/Beginner-Mediate:* Staunchly dedicated to what they're learning, full of fervor for their newfound passion, and quite vocal about everyone and everything else being wrong
- *The Practitioner/Intermediate:* A swinging pendulum of confidence and insecurity—trying to prove they know things while secretly worried they will be found out for not knowing

- *The Elder/Advanced:* Has forgotten more things than they can count, are still avid learners open to new ideas, and aren't afraid to say they don't know

I have been blessed to work with several wonderful mentors along my path up until this point, and what sets those individuals apart from other would-be teachers is that they are just as willing to seek advice from me as I am from them. Even though they are recognized masters of their respective fields and have been practicing for decades, they are not closed to hearing about other experiences and perspectives. They also find that their own paths are more fulfilled when they seek answers outside of themselves and what they already know. The biggest secret that is not a secret is this: The more we learn, the more we are open to grow and share, and the more we can understand what makes, connects, and expands us. And that power doesn't come from hiding, gatekeeping, or taking from others, but from mastering ourselves—spiritually, mentally, and physically.

Anyone who tells you that they are the keepers of the secrets and that you must submit to them to discover them—well, they're essentially telling you they don't know any. A person who lauds "Don't you know who I am?" over anyone else hasn't reached the elder stage. They're more concerned with what they know and what power they can hold over others. Some modern magical practices rely on a scarcity model focused on an exclusive club mentality. They imply that there are hidden, almost lost things that you can discover only through very specific gates. That is more about preserving power and a sense of hierarchy than about wisdom and safeguarding knowledge.

It's human nature to be worried that we're missing out on something, that even though we're functioning just fine and coming across things in a decent progression, maybe, somewhere, somehow, somebody else has a secret knowledge of hidden wisdom that we're missing—particularly because they're telling us they have a big, delicious secret pie that is limited to only the chosen, the elite, the special. They may also have a bridge to sell you.

To all seekers: the answers are waiting within you, poised for the right time and place to be revealed. It won't happen all at once, nor from one source, but if you seek, you shall find. Sometimes the best revelations aren't the ones you think you are looking for. Look at your journey as nonstop: as you go along your path, you will pick up tools that help you uncover more clues, maps, and possibilities. It's essentially a choose-your-own-adventure book that has infinite possibilities—all unique to *you*!

The wise Witch knows that in order to uncover the secrets within, they must be able to listen, to be kind, and to be bold. The whole universe is a free-for-all kitchen and buffet of wisdom. There are all sorts of pies out there, made by all kinds of people. All you need to do is choose wisely, eat your share, and do some work in the kitchen yourself.

## The Dangers of Witchcraft

It's been quite a fashionable topic to talk about how Witchcraft is truly dangerous, and the reasons for this trend are wide and varied. Some folks emphasize that they are putting the "teeth" back into Witchcraft. Others are more concerned about venturing into and working with the realm of the Other. Working with blood, dirt, bones, urine, nails, poisonous herbs, flight, and thorns. The evening out of odds, a dark power tapped into, rings of oaths and seals, laws, and deals. I get it. I really do. But that's not really why I think Witchcraft is dangerous.

I once read a snippet of an interview somewhere with Doreen Valiente, who, when asked "Is Witchcraft dangerous?" replied along the lines of, "Sure it is, but so is crossing the street." (#truth) She basically said, Yes, of course all of those things are dangerous, but what is danger? And to whom? Living life is the thing.

I think we need to dig deeper into history and ourselves to discover the danger—and, most importantly, to make use of it. The Witch is the ultimate wild one, yet the Witch is of the secret order of all things, the one with an eye on the pattern beneath and within all things. It is the undercurrent of hidden knowledge that has survived the death of lineages, the loss of leaders and guides, against the tides of persecution and torture, through rapids of governments and religions.

Witchcraft is dangerous because it makes us think critically. It asks us to consider all of the angles, to defy and dispel illusions—or create them. It is the tapping into the power within. It is the harnessing of the power without. It is a triumph of personal will and a celebration of essence.

Witchcraft is dangerous because it is the tool of the subversive, the downtrodden, the disillusioned, and the disenfranchised. It gives voice to those who have been silenced, eyes to the blinded, sound to those whose ears were covered, and hands and legs to those who could not move. Yes, it can be seen as a means for social reform, but Witchcraft starts first with the Witch. Change can happen from just one point of origin, with just one Witch, one idea put into motion.

They will tell you that the mob is powerful and can't be changed, that society's will is greater than yours. They will say let it go, accept it, don't think, stop being Witches, play nice, conform.

They say that because they know the truth: that even one Witch has power; even just one can bring change and turn the tide. It takes just one Witch to light the cauldron's fire and purify the drink.

Just one Witch can make a difference, and that's why Witchcraft is dangerous. It is the crack in the wall of false castles, the rust in the armor of old ideas, the voice of truth and dissent against the chorus of those who would not have you think, fight, or even exist.

But you are not alone.

# The Witch's Craft

*At the Loom:* Unravel the thread from your heart, mind, and spirit. Prepare to take your position as weaver.

*Liminally Minded*: When we listen and trust the silence of the space in between, we can see and feel the path ahead of us more clearly.

I have a blessing or gift. It is also somewhat of a curse, depending on how you look at it. It is my ability to maintain calm in the midst of chaos. I should note that you could define chaos with both negative and positive connotations here. Everyone's super-excited about things? I am calm and absorbing it. Shit is hitting the fan? There I am, scoping things out, gathering information, formulating plans. It's a curse in the sense that it sometimes gets me in trouble with others because I don't exhibit strong enough reactions from their point of view. But I can also guarantee you, per my name, that when it's time to say or do the thing, I do it in full force. All the way.

This ability to carefully watch and observe what's going on, calculate systems of balance and possible outcomes, and then act accordingly with authority is essential to the Witch's craft. Much of what could be considered "supernatural" or "extraordinary" about Witches really comes down to honing one's skills of perception and fostering intuition. Most people just really don't pay attention to the world around them. When you take time to consider probability, cause and effect, and notice details others miss, you are able to see patterns clearly. This vision aids you in being able to predict and guide those patterns. So for this chapter

on the craft of the Witch, we're going to start precisely with focusing on those skills. Then we'll explore magick, metaphysics, spellcraft, ritual, sacred space, and divination. The idea here is not to feed you a list of spells and basic how-tos but to stimulate the thought processes that will enhance your abilities and make you an effective Witch.

## Secrets of the Uncommon Witch

I grew up hearing my father say, "Common sense isn't common." As a young child, that saying was mystifying, but as I grew older, I began to understand its meaning. My upbringing challenged me to think critically, consider deeply, and solve creatively. I discovered that what seemed to be obvious and unspoken truth to me wasn't the norm. In the mirror of society, my sense of "normal" is really somewhat abnormal to others, but I've had a lifetime to get used to it.

I have found that my father's saying can definitely apply to the practice of Witchcraft. Some of the traits and abilities I value and admire the most are often overlooked for more "sexy" ones by the larger population. People tend to gravitate toward what stands out the most as proof of their "Witchiness"—proclaiming their weirdness for all to see. The same is true for many performing arts, where dancers or musicians may turn to fancy tricks in order to stand out, but it becomes more gimmick than art. Tricks provide flash and attention but offer very little real substance in the long run. When you're weird (or wyrd) from the inside out, I think the sense of knowing or being seen for who you are becomes naturally evident with very little effort.

So what are these overlooked jewels that can help you master Witchcraft? Some hidden secret rede or rune? Nope, they're simply six words—three pairs of commanding verbs that are fascinatingly dualistic in nature. The pairing is essential because each one balances out the other.

As with the tendency of black-and-white thinking, it can be very easy to become unbalanced if you believe one side trumps the other. These words may look basic in presentation, but they represent skills, abilities, or talents I believe are essential to Witchcraft. Some may dismiss them as obvious, but sometimes that which is in plain sight is the

most elusive to understand and achieve. The least sparkling object may hold the greatest jewel within it.

## Observe and Obscure

Witches watch. We notice signs, signals, and symbols found in nature, in people, animals, and liminal spaces. Through our observations, we reveal and divine, we make careful choices. We bring knowledge and wisdom into the light, yet at the same time, we know the value of obscuring, of hiding, and of illusion. We are familiar with the safety found within the dark and that which is hushed under velvet layers.

*How to Observe:* Slow down, turn away from the flashing and talking screens in your life for a few moments, and really look at what's going on around you. If you're inside, what's the space like? Who or what is there with you, what furniture or other items are in the room, where's the exit, are there windows, what's the temperature like, what's the volume of the room? If you're outside, what's the sky doing? What's the weather like, where does the wind come from, what are the birds and animals doing, how many are there, what's blooming and fading?

*How to Obscure:* Recognize that not everything has to be made public for all to see. You do not have to reveal everything about yourself to everyone or to anyone who asks. You don't have to explain everything. Also, part of glamour is to emphasize what you want to draw attention to while also knowing what you wish to minimize.

## Listen and Speak

Witches listen. It's part of the observation skill. But we don't listen just to respond or to know when to speak. We listen to understand, consider, and contemplate. We physically hear verbal information, but we also take in the emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical context as well.

When we speak, we don't do it to hear ourselves talk. We don't waste breath. Rather, we speak to guide and instruct, to make a difference when it is within our power to do so. We know our words hold power. We don't use them to make empty threats or pompous boasts, but we can use them as knives to cut and cleanse, just as we can use them as a balm to heal and protect.

*How to Listen:* Most people proclaim that they know how to listen, but in reality they are multitasking—either they're visually processing other information, like on their phone or while driving, or they're anxiously awaiting their turn to speak, listening only for a break instead of hearing and processing what's being said. If you're speaking directly with someone, watch their body language and make eye contact. Sense how they are feeling and what they are saying—not just with their words but with their body as well. Instead of immediately wondering how what they're saying could relate to you and how you should respond, take time to acknowledge what they are sharing. Ask questions respectfully, and repeat back information that you need to confirm or are confused about. You'll be amazed at how much more you'll remember and what other information you will glean.

Additionally, even if you are alone in a room, what sounds do you hear? What is the hum of the room? Think about how that noise contributes to the overall feel of the room. If you are outside, what sounds can you decipher? Have the birds gone silent, or are the crows making a ruckus again?

*How to Speak:* Sure, we all know how to talk (with our mouths and/or hands), but speaking tends to be a different matter. When you feel you have something important to say, make sure to take time to breathe. Imagine expressing out through your chest/heart/lungs versus out of your head. This redirection not only helps to keep you calmer but also gives an aura of authority to your words. Also, volume doesn't necessarily equate with power—people tend to have a tendency to tune out repetitive loud noise. If you speak more softly, it often makes people pay closer attention so they can hear what you are saying.

## Change and Rest

One of my favorite root-word definitions for *witch* is "one who bends or changes." Witches bring about change: physical, metaphysical, emotional, spiritual, mental—any and all are possible.

We can affect the microcosm to influence the macrocosm. We can change ourselves and shift our environment. But then there's also the other side of change, and that is knowing when to rest, to be still, when

not to act. Sometimes you just have to let things be, and sometimes it's not your place or job to do the thing. I will admit that the skill of rest has been the hardest for me to master. I'm a workaholic and an overthinker. I want to help, do, make, and create. But for my own good as well as that of others, sometimes it's best to just step back and let the fields lie fallow for a bit.

*How to Change:* Change involves owning your power and not being afraid to use it. Be open to opportunities, keep an eye out for openings, and stand your ground for what you believe in.

Sometimes change happens not because *you* move but because you refused to be moved. Other times we realize our own ideas are holding us back. If things don't seem to be flowing in our direction as expected, that is often a sign to examine our position and reevaluate. We have to be willing at times to change ourselves to get things moving.

*How to Rest:* It is perfectly fine to say no, especially if saying no means you are taking care of yourself. Rest means taking a break from doing all the things, removing excess stimuli, and just being quiet for a bit. Sometimes rest involves getting lost in a story or watching a movie or just taking a nap with the cats. Go take a walk in the park, in the woods, or by the water. Sit down, smell the air, count the birds, and watch the clouds and people go by. It's not being lazy, it's refueling.

Honing the ability to change and to rest is a daily practice and a lifelong journey. Not only that, but these abilities are at the root of all of the more "shiny" things people are often drawn to when they start to get into Witchcraft. Want to cast spells? Better know how to observe the world around you and consider how change will work. Want to tell the future? You need to be able to listen and know when to speak.

Want to be powerful? You need to know how to rest and when to be silent.

## Fear, Intuition, and Instinct

At one of my workshops, a participant asked, "How do you know the difference between when you're fearful of change and when there's legitimate danger? Like when a new deity wants to work with you versus when it's something else that doesn't have your best intentions in

mind?" I thought for a moment, agonizing over how the answer was going to sound. But I said it anyway: "You should know the difference in your gut." I then added, "If you haven't learned to trust yourself enough yet, then take extra precautions to protect yourself."

It sounds so simple and basic, right? Trusting your gut and knowing how to interpret it correctly. This skill is so incredibly important, valuable, and essential to being an effective Witch. But I would wager that it is one of the hardest for modern Witches to develop. Here are just some of the many reasons why trusting your inner voice is hard:

- Fear of doing it wrong, being called out, or looking stupid
- Being constantly bombarded with useless information
- Family dynamics that may not foster self-starting, self-esteem, or self-confidence
- Educational systems that don't support critical thinking skills or independence
- Systems that downgrade or insult intuition since it's "invisible"
- It's not a skill you can just absorb from a book or develop overnight.

We're often so hard on ourselves. We read how other people do things, and instead of going, "That's a neat way of looking at it," we may wonder if our way is wrong, even if it's been working great, with fantastic results. But then we wonder if maybe there's something we don't know. Trusting ourselves can be incredibly hard. That requires listening to our own bodies and thoughts, and considering them in turn.

For example, let's consider the original question from that workshop I mentioned. I pointed out that there's a difference between fear of change and fear for safety. The understanding of how they differ comes down to reading your own body. For example, there are times when I know something will be good for me, like going out to spend time with friends, but the desire to stay home is strong. This desire could be related to my physical comfort because it's dark and cold out, or it could be more emotionally linked to social anxiety because the outing involves new people or an unfamiliar location. Both of these reasons

generate a distinct physical/mental sensation. I'm not afraid of going out because of possible physical or emotional dangers, but the desire to stay comfortable and/or anxiety about dealing with new people or places feels prohibitive. The sensation is like encountering a small wall I know I can easily just walk over, but do I really *want* to? At the same time, I know that if I do go out, I'll have a good experience that I won't regret.

Fear for safety feels completely different. This fear is like knowing there's something mortally dangerous there that you can smell or hear but you can't see. Instead of a little wall, there's a giant barrier in front of you that wasn't there earlier, or a big heavy gate. Or it could feel like an arm across your chest—like Mom reaching out instinctively when she has to brake suddenly, despite the fact that you're wearing a seatbelt. Sure, you can climb the wall with some effort, heave open the gate, or push past the arm, but you get the sense of a deeper foreboding that holds you in place.

All of these involve very real sensations and thought processes in the body. You feel a subtle yet physical response to a given situation. It can be a sudden sense of excitement, like a light came on to point out a new way, or an overwhelming sense of calm when considering one of two choices. You may feel an adrenaline rush, with heart racing or prickly armpits. It could be your stomach feeling like it dropped down to your knees. These physical responses tell us to be warned, be on guard, protect yourself, make this choice, go that way, stop, protect, push, fight, run. When we connect these gut feelings with our critical thinking and spiritual mind, it can lead to amazing outcomes in our work.

Naming this sensation "gut instinct" isn't a bad idea either. What does our digestive system do? It takes in all the liquids and solids we ingest and transforms them into things we can use to live, discarding what we don't need. Your intuition does the same thing by absorbing all the information you're experiencing or have experienced (physical, metaphysical, spiritual, etc.) and processing it for the appropriate response.

To foster your own intuition and strengthen your gut instinct, I recommend taking a moment to check in with yourself when you're facing a decision (and you have more than a split second to do it). How do

you physically feel about it? What are the pros and cons? How urgent or strongly do you feel about the situation? What are the possible outcomes? If you removed the outside opinions/other forces trying to influence you, what do you feel would be the best solution?

You may want to keep a journal as well, documenting certain situations and answering the previous questions. You can also write about things that happened to you and try to remember how you felt before you did or said a certain thing. Did you get that warning sensation but you did it anyway? What happened? Or did you give in to outside pressure and ended up regretting it? This kind of consideration and journaling can help you gain more self-trust on your path as a Witch.

Consider these words from the book *Cosmic Religion* by the legendary brain Albert Einstein: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research."

With those words in mind, let us move on to the realm of magick and spellcraft.

## The Reality of Magick

When the world thinks of a Witch, they most often associate the word with spells, complete with a bubbling cauldron full of mysterious ingredients, and fantastical results. Usually close by is a giant and ancient book of spells—a grimoire full of secrets and incantations. If we wipe away the costumes and the CGI, what we're left with is an ordinary-looking someone cooking a special meal in the kitchen, maybe following Grandmom's recipe, with a few little tweaks along the way. Magick isn't that unusual or full of special effects, as we'll see.

When I talk about magick, I'm attempting to name the force or action that is the essence of change combined with the spirit of influence.[13] To me, the word magick falls short of really capturing that, but

13. Why do I spell magick with a *k*? When I first started out formally on my path, it was popular to use the *k* to differentiate between the kind of metaphysical activities we do and stage magic, sleight of hand, etc. The trend of adding the *k* comes and goes, but personally I'm rather ambivalent about it—old habits die hard.

until I or someone else comes up with a better word that also enables mutual understanding, we're using it. Magick is like both the space between neurons *and* the message that is relayed through it. You could see magick as the friction of threads being woven as they pass by each other, and the pattern they create together. It is the metaphysical application of thought, focus, and the will to create a desired change. The change you are looking for might be within yourself, your environment, other people, things, or something else you seek to manipulate.

How is that possible? Matter and potential energy exist all around us—everything around you, living or inanimate, is made up of atoms. Whatever you're currently sitting on, the tablet or book you're holding right now, and any light source you may be using are all made up of vibrating particles. You can certainly and fairly easily exert physical force to interact with these objects around you. You can turn a lamp on and off, reposition the chair, scroll through a tablet, or turn pages to affect them. That is one kind of energy manipulation. Feelings, thoughts, and chemical reactions like pheromones also can cause subtle but significant shifts in our bodies and environments, though we tend to not give those "invisible" things much credit. However, it doesn't take a whole lot of science to recognize that our beloved pets can sense when we're feeling sad. In fact, some service animals are specially trained to recognize hard-to-see things like anxiety and the warning signs for seizures. There are stories about cats who live at nursing homes that are able to sense who is close to death.

But let us not forget that we too are animals and have similar senses. If someone comes into the room in a rage or an otherwise negative mood, it immediately affects everyone else, putting them on edge. Inversely, if someone surprises us with a laugh or a smile, it can be contagious—suddenly we feel lighter and happier. When we stress about things, we can manifest very physical symptoms, from an upset stomach to skin irritation and hair loss. How we feel about our world and those around us does indeed have a direct influence on our physical health and well-being, our relationships, our communications, and all the places we occupy. We can harness that metaphysical vitality and effort to exert influence and change over many of these areas. Through

magick, we can shift ourselves and our world, similar to how a thread interconnects with other threads in weaving.

## The Colors and Levels of Magick

When discussing the finer aspects of magick, it is inevitable that someone will ask me about black (implying bad) magick and white (implying good) magick. To make things very clear, magick doesn't have a color.[14] Magick as a force and reality is essentially—again for lack of a better word—neutral.

In terms of Witchcraft, it was fashionable in the mid to late twentieth century to declare oneself a "white Witch" to signify that you meant no harm, that you were a "good" Witch. This use of this term becomes blurred into a sense of "dirty" versus "clean"—which plays host to a load of racist, classist, gendered, and cultural baggage.[15] The notion of white/black magic does a poor job of describing much of anything, from how magic works to who does it. Using *black* and *white* in terms of magick is a practice that needs to die out, immediately.

Far too many websites and books tend to separate magick out like this:

- *White Magic:* Magic that is used for good, healing and protecting people, positive vibrations and lifting energy white light, powered by love, used by Wiccans/Pagans, natural magic, right-hand path.
- *Black Magic:* Magic that is used for bad purposes, to harm or attack people, for malicious workings such as animal sacrifices, powered by fear, used by devil worshipers Satanists, used for selfish purposes, chaotic, negative/dark/sucking energy, unnatural, left-hand path.

14. This is not to say that colors themselves don't have metaphysical correspondences. They do indeed, across multiple cultures. What I'm expressing here is the fallacy of defining magick as good/white and bad/black.

15. See my post "The Fallacy of Black or White Magick," http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tempest/2018/03/fallacy-black-white-magick.html.

There's so much convolution in that comparison that it makes me a bit ill to list it here. People try to assign good or bad intention to determine the perceived color of magick, but that's faulty logic.

Through the lens of how I defined magick itself, imagine a hammer. If you use that hammer to build something constructive such as a house, you could say it's a white hammer. But if you use it to hit someone over the head, you might say it's a black hammer. You could say that your intention is what defines whether it's good or bad, white or black.

But what if that house you're constructing—with the best of intentions—obstructs your neighbor's view or destroys a natural habitat just by existing? And what if that skull-crushing hammer fends off a known killer and saves the life of a whole family? As the saying goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." You can have the best of intentions and cause a lot of harm. Inversely, in a moment of destruction, you can save and protect life. You can factor in the initial intention all you want, but at the end of the day there will be an array of "positive" and "negative" outcomes to any action, and how the whole situation is viewed depends on the perspective of society's mirror at that given moment.

We can dissect everything into positive and negative, by intention as well as by results, but even so much of that is subjective to perspective or point of view. A healing spell can kill bacteria or cancer—it's a well-intentioned spell that has negative consequences for some of the entities involved, but we generally consider it a positive working for the healed individual. A binding spell might be seen as a negative working by some people, but what if its goal is to protect? Every spell will have a variety of reactions—intended and unintended, positive and negative, depending on one's perspective. You simply cannot define magick solely by the intent nor by the results.

Another combative area and cause for confusion is separating magick into "high" and "low" levels. "High magick" is often associated with highly ritualized ceremonial workings and many carefully coordinated associations and components. Alternatively, "low magick" tends to operate with very little theater or flash, a sort of "do what you must with what you've got" Witchcraft. They both tend to correspond with

very different personalities and opinions about magick, but essentially they are simply different approaches and solutions to the same problem. Neither is more powerful or effective—it's simply a matter of personal preference.

## Magick and Morality

As I mentioned in the star section of RITES, it's up to you to determine what your personal code of ethics or sense of morality is. Some people live by "If it harm none, do what you will" and the threefold law of return. I personally find the concepts of harm and will very subjective and open to interpretation. I also don't believe there is a cosmic scorekeeper doling out blessings or punishments in sets of three. I don't do things because I think I will get cosmic rewards—or avoid doing them because I'm afraid of being punished. I do what I logically and intuitively believe is the best course of action for all involved.

As I mentioned in the previous section, any action can have both negative and positive reactions, regardless of the original intent, though it stands to reason that if you kick enough hornet nests, you'll eventually get stung. I also like the old proverb "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." I don't believe it's easier to be kind than cruel. In fact, I can think of quite a few situations where it was a personal struggle to remember to be kind. However, the struggle was worthwhile and achieved the desired result much more quickly and effectively than being a jerk would have (though the temptation was great, and it probably would have felt good in the moment!).

I *do* believe you need to use common sense when working magick, using the powers of forethought and intuition before resorting to action. Make an effort to consider possible outcomes and consequences, defining what you're looking to achieve and to avoid. Sometimes it is helpful to have a checklist to go through. My partner, Nathaniel, introduced me to his "three rules for living" many years ago, and they have become standard in our household. These rules can apply to all aspects of life—and that certainly includes working magick.

1. *Take care of yourself.* If you don't take care of your needs and respect yourself, it's going to be difficult to find anyone else who will. Being "selfish" isn't always a bad thing, especially when other people's demands are exhausting you.
2. *Take care of others.* When you can, help out others in need. Whether they need healing, protection, love, inspiration, or prosperity, a little help goes a long way. Looking out for each other strengthens the fabric we weave.
3. *Don't be a jerk.* Be kind, compassionate, and strong. Listen to people, learn to receive feedback, and respect the wishes of others. While it is technically possible to take care of yourself and others while still being an asshole about it, don't go out of your way to hurt others.

I take these rules into consideration before I act nearly all the time, and it's always done me (and others) well. If you're wondering how you can apply these rules to magick, turn each of them into a question before doing a working:

4. *Am I taking care of myself?* Is what I'm planning to do something that is good for me, especially in the long term? Does it add to or support my health, well-being, and emotional and mental stability, or spiritually aid me in some way? Or would I be preventing growth, wearing myself down, or overextending myself on behalf of someone else—especially someone who needs to own up to their own responsibilities?
5. *Am I taking care of others?* Is the work I'm doing generally beneficial to other people? Am I protecting, guiding, aiding, healing, or otherwise helping someone else in some way?
6. *Am I being a jerk?* Is what I am considering to do mainly a way to satisfy my ego? Am I working purely out of a place of anger, jealousy, hurt, insecurity, hate, or paranoia? If I waited a few days, would I see this situation differently?

As you'll see coming up, I definitely believe that hexing, cursing, and other forms of "baneful" magick can be extremely useful. We will cover binding and banishing and how they can yield effective results. In the previous questions, I'm not passing judgment on working from a place of anger, frustration, or some other "negative" emotion. When it comes to workings that focus on protection and justice, these emotional states do come in handy. But sometimes we can get angry over something that was a misunderstanding or a temporary inconvenience. Stepping back from the situation to gain insight and give yourself some time is a wise course of action.

## Riding the Waves of Magick

I want to give you another way of looking at and thinking about magick. I learned to surf when I was six years old on the real deal—a five-foot long fiberglass, single-fin board that was my brother's. Still in the family today, the board sports a multicolor shooting star followed by a rainbow stream. The first time I managed to stand up, I triumphantly rode that wave all the way from the far breakers to the shore.

As I grew up, I still surfed on the star board, but more frequently I invested in and used Morey Bodyboards. The surfboard was still awesome, but the boogie board was lighter for me to carry and also meant I could enjoy the surf more often—instead of having to wait for waves big enough to ride with the fiberglass board.

Then in my late teens, I started to bodysurf more and more, leaving the boards behind on the beach. If you're not familiar with it, bodysurfing is when you position your body to ride the wave, being propelled toward the shore while suspended in the curl and crash of the wave—your body is the board.

Because of my childhood, I have a deep connection to the Atlantic Ocean and perceive much magick within and around bodies of water. This in turn speaks to my connections and perceptions about living as a Witch and how I view magick. On my best days in my personal practice, I feel tapped into the universe, like I am flowing with it and on it—not unlike bodysurfing the waves of the ocean. I'm subject to how the universe flows, but I can choose what I wish to ride and I can change how I

am positioned within it. And when I'm consciously working magick, it's just me alone and the powers that be—nothing else between us.

So in looking how one practices, you could use surfing as a metaphor to describe the approach and interaction. The fiberglass surfboard? It's a big, expensive tool that has a certain amount of danger to it. It takes a lot of energy to haul it out and use it and requires regular upkeep and cleaning. You have to be very conscious of who's around you when you're using it, as you could severely hurt someone if you ran into them with it. Also, when you fall off, you have to be careful that the surfboard doesn't bounce back and hit you (requiring stitches—you can ask my brothers). It takes skill and dedication to really learn how to work it, but the amount of risk never quite changes. When the waves are hard to come by, you may have to go out really deep in the water, where you can't touch the ground anymore and are possibly subject to sharks and other sea life. However, when everything works in your favor, you're riding on top of the world, and everyone can see that too. You're not quite of the wave, because there's this big board between you, but you're riding with it and on top of it all. That to me sums up ceremonial and similar forms of ritual and "high" magick: they require a lot of effort, there are a lot of factors to figure in, and a fair amount of risk is involved, but they can produce some amazing results.

The boogie board is your typical spellcraft and sympathetic forms of magick. It takes some investment, but it's far more convenient and can be used more often. Like the surfboard, you do need to watch where you are going, but the damage done when you hit someone (or yourself) with it isn't as severe—though it still can hurt! It takes a bit of practice to make the rides last longer and to maneuver it more freely, but the requirements are pretty basic: you, the board, and a wave. How and when you pick the wave will affect the kind of ride you will have. In spellcraft terms, it's you, some herbs, a candle, poppet, etc., and focusing your intent. You're riding the wave, still with a board, but are closer to the action of the wave, with less of a visual show.

Bodysurfing equates to magick without any tools or physical evidence of a working—it's just you and the wave. And unlike with a surfboard or boogie board, you're not riding on top of the wave but are *in*

it. To get the best ride possible, before you take off, you make sure the road is clear ahead of you, put your head down, and launch. Sure, you could try to keep your head up and see where you are going, but that would impede the position of your body and affect how well your ride would go. Bodysurfing isn't about how it looks to anyone else, because it's pretty hard to see the person riding the wave or for them to see anything either. No one will probably even see you or know you did it. It's best to close your eyes and become part of the wave, to feel the sensation and movement of it all, adjusting your body and mind instinctively. Occasionally you do end up sand-logged and shell-scraped on shore, or modestly positioned in the little breakers needing to reclaim your bathing suit, but you got there regardless. It's the most immediate, immersive way to ride a wave. It would seem to be the easiest of all three methods because it doesn't involve any investment, but it takes skill and practice not only to train your body and mind to move the right way and to keep in shape but also to learn to read the water in order to choose the best wave.

In the end, all three methods are perfectly valid ways to ride the waves to get to the shore—they're just each a bit different, providing separate viewpoints and experiences. It all depends on you and what you choose at any given time; just because you've done it one way doesn't mean you can't try it other ways.

## The Art of Spellcraft

Spellcraft is the application of magick through the means of a formula. An idea becomes thought, which becomes action—intentional and conscious as well as deep into the subconscious, activating change. Most forms of spellcraft involve arranging the physical to affect the metaphysical. As human beings, we respond well to tactile and other physical experiences in order to satisfy the parts of our brain that we need to chart progress. We can stimulate our senses by burning colorful candles, crushing herbs, anointing with oils, burning incense, mixing brews, drawing sigils, playing an instrument, moving our bodies, or saying, chanting, or singing words. All of these physical stimuli connect

with symbols we internally respond to and coordinate with the goals of our intentions.

For Witches, casting spells could be considered an equivalent of prayer. However, one big difference is that prayer generally involves petitioning an outside force to grant you something, whereas spellcraft is most often seen as taking matters into your own hands. Some forms of spellcraft involve calling upon deities, spirits, and other entities to assist, guide, or lend energy to the working, but the Witch is still the initiator of the power.

There are many kinds of spells, which can range from very simple to extremely elaborate. A spell can be performed within a circle or other sacred space and coordinated down to a designated day and hour, or a spell can happen on the fly while driving down the road.

Complexity does not equate to more success or power. Some of the most effective workings I have experienced involved no ingredients or ritual at all. How you approach spellcraft depends mainly on you and your personal preferences and background.

The form of spellcraft that most people are familiar with falls in the category of sympathetic magick. Sympathetic magick functions according to the concept that the microcosm can affect the macrocosm, or the part can affect or influence the whole. This kind of spellwork involves using items that imitate a person, place, action, or thing, and/or that correspond with something via a relationship, physical connection, or other similarity that can induce change. Spells that utilize ingredients such as herbs, oils, candles, personal effects, colors, cords, sigils, poppets, jars, pouches, and talismans all generally work on the basis of the part/whole or correspondence relationship.

Spellcraft is just a small portion of being a Witch. I'm including this section because it's often one of the areas people want to know the most about. My goal is to clear up some misconceptions and give you a solid foundation, but remember, the purpose of this book isn't to be a collection of spells, but rather to help give you guidance and inspiration. There's a list of resources in the back of this book for you to consider for further research. Below I've defined some of the most

common kinds of spellcraft that you may encounter based on how I see them in my own practice. I have also included an example of each kind.

*Baneful:* Typically seen as anything (a spell, ritual, or substance) that has effects that can be considered harmful; most commonly associated with poisonous plants, with the understanding that sometimes there is a fine line between helping and harming—or having the potential to do both simultaneously.

*Example: Atropa belladonna* (deadly nightshade) is considered to be a baneful herb—its foliage and berries are toxic. It has associations with love and beauty due its historic use in cosmetics, and extracts of it are used in both flying ointments and medicine, but it still essentially is a poison.

*Banishing:* To send away a person or thing so that they/it may no longer interfere in a specific situation.

*Example:* The picture of an abusive ex is burned along with rue, vervain, and rose thorns. The ashes are driven out of town and scattered at a dump.

*Binding:* Prevents action/behavior, curbs or contains an issue, does damage control, or aids in protecting.

*Example:* A teen struggling with self-cutting makes a small poppet of themselves. Inside the poppet are herbs and stones of healing and strength. On a wide white ribbon they write, "I am worthy. I can and will stop harming myself. I am beautiful. I am loved. I am strong." The ribbon is bound around the poppet, words facing inward. Then the doll is kept in a safe place.

*Blessing:* To acknowledge, recognize, or bestow positive energy upon a person, place, or thing (a house blessing, a wedding, etc.).

*Example:* A couple is handfasted. The ritual itself is a type of blessing of the relationship, but they are also moving into a new home. One of the ribbons used in the ceremony is coiled and buried in a small ceramic pot under a small rosemary plant by the front door. The ribbon symbolizes their partnership and love, and it being buried by the

front door connects them to their household while aiding in protecting it. The rosemary plant represents memory and can be harvested as well, so what's below its roots will continue to foster growth.

*Candle Magick:* Connecting the burning of a candle to the desired effect. Candles may be of certain colors or shapes, carved with words, sigils, or symbols, anointed in oils, or specially made from scratch for a specific purpose.

*Example:* A green candle is carved with dollar signs and anointed with money-drawing oil. The candle is then burned during the waxing moon to draw financial prosperity.

*Charm:* A phrase, poem, chant, or object that attracts or draws something.

*Example:* Carrying a rabbit's foot is considered to be a lucky charm (for the holder, not for the rabbit obviously).

*Cleansing:* Metaphysically and spiritually cleaning a person, place, or object; removing that which is unwelcome or undesirable.

*Example:* After physically cleaning a house, a practitioner makes a mixture of sea salt, sage, and other herbs to sprinkle on the floor. The mixture is then swept out of the home in a counterclockwise direction.

*Conjure:* Traditionally means to call into being or presence, usually in application to spirits, and more recently used in reference to Hoodoo workings.

*Example:* A ceremonial magician may draw a certain sigil on the floor to conjure a specific spirit. In Hoodoo, a wide variety of spellcraft, rootwork, and spirit contact may be referred to as conjure.

*Curse:* A baneful working; a calling down or persuasion of justice.

*Example:* A curse can be a simple proclamation, such as "May the truth stick to their tongues with the tenacity of a frozen pole." In Romani culture, a curse can be an oath of consequences if you go against

your word, like "May I die a painful death if what I am telling you is not true."

*Evil Eye:* Casting a look that is believed to be capable of bringing bad luck to whomever or whatever it is directed toward, sometimes with intent but often unconsciously; also refers to the charms meant to deflect this detrimental gaze.

*Example:* Spitting on the ground after someone has complimented you is a common action against the evil eye throughout the Mediterranean area. Praise can be seen as envy, jealousy, or simply drawing unwanted attention. Sacrificing your own fluid offsets the negative influence.

*Fertility:* Workings to help foster and stimulate successful procreation in people, animals, plants, or ideas.

*Example:* Dancing around the maypole is considered to be a fertility ritual. Carrying around the carving of a rabbit in rose quartz is a fertility charm.

*Finding:* A charm, spell, or method used to help locate lost things, people, or items.

*Example:* A dowsing rod is used to locate underground water. An example of a finding charm is invoking St. Anthony (the patron saint of lost things) with "St. Anthony, please come around. Something's lost and can't be found."

*Glamour:* Magick that fascinates, allures, accents, or disguises in order to draw or appeal.

*Example:* The daily ritual of applying makeup or mindfully dressing yourself as you get ready for work can be seen as a kind of glamour. You're not only changing your physical appearance but are preparing yourself to face the world. It builds confidence and can alter your demeanor, in turn influencing others.

*Healing:* Work that mends and balances body, spirit, or emotions; can be done by drawing out, cleansing, banishing, or infusing.

*Example:* After a coven member underwent cancer treatment, the circle gathered together to perform reiki, provide comforting and healthy meals, and make a special blanket infused with healing-oriented sigils.

*Hexing:* Hexing tends to get associated in the modern world with negative workings, but *hex* at its root means simply "spell" or "to bewitch," from the German *hexe.*

*Example:* All around Pennsylvania Dutch country, you'll find images known as hex signs—colorful patterns featuring animals and flowers—to ward off negativity and other unwanted things and draw good things instead.

*Love Spell:* There are a wide range of love spells. The most effective ones involve self-love and drawing love, versus the ones that involve drawing specific people.

*Example:* Making an offering of red roses to Aphrodite to help you find the right partner for a loving and healthy relationship can be considered a love spell. To make that happen, expect work to happen on you first.

*Luck, Money, and Prosperity:* These kinds of workings are meant to draw good financial energy, please the Fates or luck deities, and/or banish poverty/bad luck.

*Example:* To draw fortune, someone may make a small red velvet bag to carry with them, and place inside of it a gold coin, a tiny statue of the Hindu deity Ganesh (the remover of obstacles), a four-leaf clover, and a lucky sea bean.

*Poppet:* Often called a "voodoo doll," a poppet is a small humanlike figure typically made of fabric or wax and used in sympathetic magick to affect the person it is modeled after (or the poppet may contain something from the person, like part of their hair or clothing); can be used positively or negatively.

*Example:* A healing poppet could be stuffed with beneficial herbs, while a binding poppet may be filled with nails or physically bound.

*Protection:* A working used to guard a person, place, or thing and keep them safe and out of harm's way.

*Example:* Inscribing a sigil for protection in blessed salt water on the windows and doors of your home.

*Psychic Power:* A working performed with the goal of enhancing one's inner vision; can be temporary or designed to build long-term skills.

*Example:* An infusion or oil made from clary sage may be used to enhance one's dreams for a night.

*Purification:* Different from cleansing, as purification is usually done in preparation for a sacred activity of some sort, like a ritual or oracular activity.

*Example:* Someone looking to purify themselves for a big working might alter their diet to either avoid certain foods or eat/drink ones associated with a particular deity for a week, preparing and purifying them internally. Before the event itself, they partake in a special bath of salts and herbs to purify the outside of their body.

*Saint Magick:* Working with the saints, petitioning them for aid and often bargaining with them, presenting an icon with gifts or fulfilling promises when the goal is achieved, as well as "punishing" the icon when the goal isn't granted by turning the statue or photo to face the wall, stripping away candles and flowers, and burying or hiding the statue or photo until the petition is granted.

*Example:* A common practice in my family is to bury a statue of St. Joseph upside down, just outside the front door of the house that needs to be sold. He gets dug up and cleaned off after the sale has successfully gone through.

*Shapeshifting:* May refer to the actual changing of a body's physical form from human into an animal. Can also reference vision flight where the Witch's spirit is able to shift form on other planes while the physical body remains the same.

*Example:* During a sabbat revel, a Witch may dress up like an animal they have a spiritual relationship or connection with, and perform ecstatic dance, merging with the creature in the rite.

*Sigils:* Specially crafted symbols with magical properties that are applied (drawn, carved, painted, traced, etc.) for their desired effect. These can be crafted by the practitioner or passed down in certain traditions. They are essentially excellent shorthand for any kind of spell you wish to do.

*Example:* A Witch may devise their own protective sigil to use to bless the windows and doorways of their home.

*Traveling:* Can refer to workings that bring safe and speedy travel or to out-of-body or trance-induced states.

*Example:* Putting an altar on your dashboard decorated with travel and good luck charms to protect you and your vehicle wherever you go.

*Unbinding:* Also called "unblocking," a working designed to remove created barriers, blocks, or other hampering energies.

*Example:* A person seeking to loosen the hold of a past relationship may enter the ritual space wearing an item that represents that relationship, like an old shirt. With the assistance of friends, the garment is carefully cut away from the body into ribbons and then burned.

*Visualization Magick:* Magick that is worked solely within the mind, with no ingredients.

*Example:* A Witch simply focuses on a situation they wish to see happen, seeing it clearly in their mind's eye. Often used in acquiring a certain item, like a rare book or an unusual object.

*Weather Work:* Spells, charms, or rites done to shift, change, or otherwise control the weather.

*Example:* A group of Witches at a festival seeking to shift the path of a storm gather in a circle and visualize the separating of clouds and the shifting of the wind.

## Writing Your Own Spells

I'm always surprised that people are reluctant to write their own spells, and often look instead for something out of a book. I suppose I can relate, because when it comes to cooking, I often search the internet for ideas and read reviews to see what ingredients and methods work best. From there, though, I still do my own take on my findings. I'm less likely to do this when it comes to baking, though. To me, cooking is like geometry: I understand how the shapes work and I can shift them accordingly to get the result I desire. Vegetables, meat, fat, and seasonings are all in or close to their natural state. Baking is more like chemistry: the ingredients are a bit more mysterious and often processed, and the room for error potentially greater. I've watched my mother, an accomplished baker for decades, have a tried-and-true cookie or cake recipe flop for no apparent reason. I prefer to hedge my bets on the potatoes.

Objects used in spells are meant to resonate with the subconscious parts of our brain. In many cases, the relationship that your brain recognizes doesn't even have to be accurate to trigger the appropriate effect. If you believe X herb has Y property because that's what someone told you, there's a good chance that the power of your brain will override any other possible connections or interpretations—even if you realize after the fact that the information was incorrect. Of course, I'm not implying that magical properties assigned to herbs, rocks, etc., are made up or have no influence. Clearly every object has some sort of resonance. How plants are grown, the smells they give off, and the chemical effects of their roots, leaves, and flowers all have very real effects on our bodies, depending on how they are applied, consumed, smoked, or observed. Crystals and metals are made up of different combinations of elements, such as iron, copper, sulfur, and carbon, which conduct energy and affect the body in different ways.

Now that I've explained all that, devising your own spells may seem more daunting, but remember, you're not baking a cake here. Keep it simple—this is more like boiling water or frying an egg. (I'll try to refrain from making judgments if those two things terrify you... No, I won't. Seriously, you should know how to do those things even if you're not a Witch. Life skills, people!) Boiling water is essentially choosing

an appropriately sized pot or kettle to boil water in, pouring the water into the container, and adding a heat source. That seems very simple and straightforward, yes? Well, when working magick you are the heat source, your intention is the water, and the spell is the kettle. The kettle assists in providing the form for what you need to hold your focus on and achieve your goal. In the end, it doesn't really matter if you use the spell equivalent of a high-end fancy kettle or an old saucepan, as long as the spell gets the job done. Similarly, you don't need to dance around to please the gods or chant loudly to make the water boil, but doing so could kill some time or at least be amusing while you wait.

As you become familiar with or drawn to a particular kind of spellcraft, it's easy to build upon what you learn. In the resource section of this book, I've also included a list of books that you will find handy if you want to learn more about ingredient spells. Just keep in mind that ingredients aren't necessary and aren't the main source of power for making something happen—*you* are.

Basically, spellcraft is metaphysical problem solving. Part one is identifying the problem or goal and the possible outcomes, then deciding if you understand and accept the responsibility for them. Ask yourself these three questions:

1. What is it that I wish to accomplish?
2. What are the possible reactions from my spell?
3. Will I accept responsibility for what happens—that which I can perceive and that which I cannot?

Part two is considering what kind of spell you need, what materials you need, and how or when to do the spell:

1. What kind of spell will work best? (Are you healing, cleansing, banishing, binding, building, etc.?)
2. What spellcraft method or approach is best suited for this situation?
3. Does the spell require materials or special timing for it to be most effective for me?

Remember to try to keep your spell as simple as possible. I cannot emphasize enough that you don't have to spend a lot of money on collecting the right "stuff" (unless you really, really want to, of course). I challenge you to be part of what I refer to as the MacGyver School of Spellcraft: Only got a pen, a sticky note, and a tealight? Make it work and manifest!

## Magick Is Not a Band-Aid

Talking about spells is probably one of my least favorite things to do when discussing elements of Witchcraft. Even as a teenager, I was more interested in books on mythology and folklore than those focusing on spellcraft. History, theory, practice, culture: all day long, please. Modern books on spells? Nope.

So imagine the joy I was experiencing when I was on the radio show *Coast to Coast AM* in 2017 to promote my book *The Witch's Cauldron* and the subject kept coming back to spells—which meant me talking about solving problems through mundane means, not easy fixes, and doing work for yourself. Yet afterward, my inbox got flooded with emails asking for spells. (No, I wasn't surprised either.)

It is perhaps ironic that for as much as I dislike talking about spells, I'm really good at magick. I rarely do "ingredient" spells (aka sympathetic magick), but I have a knack for prescribing the right spell or ritual for folks who need it (people I'm counseling or folks I know, not people looking for a quick or easy fix in an email). Most of my magick doesn't involve what you may classically think of as spells.

I feel far more comfortable doing spellcraft paintings and designing sigils for other people. There's a science to it that I respond to innately. The "action" of the spell doesn't stem solely from my drawing or painting it but from the interaction the end user has with it. It's a tool for them to activate. It's like connecting circuits—the power happens when they make contact with it. My art is not a magick bean that bestows miracles. I also feel the majority of my clients understand this as well. They understand that they are responsible for making change happen.

I suppose my inherent dislike for talking about spells is due to the fact that the majority of people don't understand them or how they

work. They're looking for an easy fix for whatever their issue is. They think if they follow a series of steps and put in the right ingredients, it's just like a recipe for baking a cake. But as I mentioned earlier, even baking a cake isn't that easy. There's more to it than following a recipe. You have to think about the quality of the ingredients, timing, heat, humidity, containers, etc. And if you're working with a broken oven or old flour, things aren't going to work out well.

The same is true for magick and the nature of metaphysics. True, you might follow the list of ingredients and get the desired result on your first try, but that doesn't make you a Witch, magician, or baker. Magick isn't just spellcraft; it's understanding flow, recognizing patterns, and getting beyond elbows deep in it all.

There is no instant-fix, wave-of-a-wand spell to solve your problems. You can't do a prosperity spell to get a new job, then sit on your arse, not updating your resume or networking. Well, you can, but it's probably not going to actually work. Magick isn't an outside force, mystically waiting around to do your bidding. Magick is the energy of things you set into motion—in your environment and most especially in yourself. A spell can help give you focus, but you need to actively invest in your choices and needs and take responsibility. A ritual can help relieve tension, stress, and emotional issues, but they still need to be dealt with mundanely.

So with that said, magick can be a Band-Aid that helps protect you while you heal or like a splint to help set a broken bone. It can guide the way, but if you keep hitting people with your bruised hand, it's not going to heal, regardless of how strong that Band-Aid is. It won't prevent you from getting more bruises. A cast helps, but if you keep insisting on kicking concrete walls, it can't stop you. Nor can you leave a Band-Aid on forever—the condition needs to be addressed, aired, cleaned out, and taken care of. It's up to you to manifest your will by following up with action that supports your work.

Before you can be the magick you wish to see in the world, you must first see it within yourself.

## The Crux of Cursing

When asked "What is cursing?" most people will reply with one of the following two answers:

1. The use of vulgar or impolite language
2. The throwing off of "negative" energy and/or the use of sympathetic magick to manipulate, particularly in the form of a poppet, Witch bottle, or similar system

Under the right circumstances, I can say I'm a fan of both.

People often source their ideas about cursing from fairy tales and myths, like an angry fairy from *Sleeping Beauty* or the Greek gods being petty and doling out punishments like those bestowed upon Cassandra of Troy, Medusa, Psyche, or pretty much any hero or heroine you can think of from those stories.

Then there's the legendary Baba Yaga, one of the most iconic Witches of folklore. Whether she chooses to help you or hurt you is always a gamble. Why? Because she embodies nature itself—and found within that truth is the essence of magick and energy. In and of itself, energy is neutral, unaligned—and whether something is a blessing or a curse is often a matter of personal perspective, regardless even of initial intent!

One of the most common ideas of cursing found around the world is the idea of the evil eye. Many cultures believe that in the case of both the giver and the receiver of the evil eye, neither is intentionally conscious or aware that some exchange has taken place.

Then there are also the folks who like to drop supposed hexes and curses like they're going out of style, as a means of control, making threats, and generally trying to make themselves look badass and powerful somehow. They're often trying to propagate a fantasy of themselves to others. Someone committed a transgression against them (in their opinion), and they're going to make a stink of it publicly. Or a con artist may use the legend of a curse to extort someone into giving them money or doing what they want.

In the case of fairy tales, myths, and legends, the supposed curse is a plot vehicle to drive the story or is a way of trying to assign reason to a world that rarely makes sense. Bad things happen to good people, and it makes us feel better to assign a reason for it. In the situation of con artists and the hextastic, they're both preying on human nature. They see an opportunity to make money or push their agenda, and they are usually also skilled manipulators. They know how to plant a seed and make it grow in someone's mind. They don't have to believe in the "curse"—only their target does. If the target doesn't believe, then they hold no power. It's a case of mind over matter, where if you believe you're going to have bad luck or think you're cursed, you pretty much are doing it to yourself without any additional help.

Now, when I look at hexing, cursing, and other baneful work, I'm not coming from a place of fiction, fairy tales, fraud, or egomania. I'm looking at the other side of the same coin—the same force of energy that's used to heal, grow, and bless. We can prune plants so they can have new growth. We can set up fences to protect people, pets, and places. We march, write, and make phone calls to protect the rights of others who are in danger. We can spread ideas that cause folks to think more deeply and openly and create balance and equality. The work doesn't have to be public, raw, or extravagant. It doesn't have to involve blood, piss, or scary images to make change happen (though some folks would argue that's more fun. To each their own!). Cursing, when used responsibly, can be extremely effective in bringing about positive change when other ways aren't going to work.

## Weave Your Pattern Well

When discussing spellcraft, two questions inevitably pop up: "What if your spell doesn't work?" and "What if your spell works a little too well?" I haven't had much experience personally with the former category, but I definitely had a taste of the latter when I was first starting out.

But before I discuss those specific questions, I want to make note of three very important truths to always keep in mind: "Magick follows the path of least resistance," "Mind the Fates," and "Words have power." Remember when I said that myths and folklore often contain

vital lessons for us to absorb? When I think about tales of the djinn, the perils of meeting Baba Yaga, and pretty much every Greek myth, those three phrases are the highlighted, underlined, and bolded subtext lurking within those stories. Let's take a closer look at why these things are important.

### *Magick Follows the Path of Least Resistance*

What does this mean? Imagine magick is like a big bucket of water. If you're not careful about how you pour it out, the water is very likely to slosh out and go everywhere but where you wanted it to.

Sure, you've now emptied the bucket, but you and everything else around you is probably soaking wet. Carefully ladling the water out in smaller portions so it goes in the desired direction is the best course of action. So applying the water metaphor to magick, your best course of action is to try to be as specific as possible in certain situations. An example of this would be doing a spell so you don't have to attend a certain obligatory social event you've been dreading without specifying the specific reason why you don't want to attend. Then on the day of the event you get into a car accident or come down with the flu. Not great, right? But you've gotten out of having to attend that event, though!

If you're afraid of being too specific—because yes, there are times when being too detailed is a problem—you can still do a good job of guiding your magick. If you want to fall in love, you don't have to specify with whom. If you're looking for a long-term, loving, romantic partnership of mutual respect, understanding, and passion with the right person for you, that's a good kind of non-specific specific. "Looking for love" is too open and could land you some really hot one-night stands or a dog that will love you unquestionably for the next seventeen years. Again, there's nothing wrong with those, but they may not have been what you really wanted or needed either.

### *Mind the Fates*

The Fates are often depicted as weavers. They make our threads, tend to them, measure their length, and snip them once our current life has reached its end. Whether you see the Fates as real beings or metaphors

for life, I don't believe that everything is destined down to the last minute detail. Rather, I think we have quite a bit of wiggle room for what we can do with our lives.

Think back to the loom analogy: We can weave our pattern in many different ways, but we're still connected to the same loom, so there are limits to how far we can move and change things. With the right amount of focus and planning, we can stretch and shift the pattern without straining it or ourselves too much. But if we pull too hard or refuse to do the work necessary, we're going to end up exactly where we started.

*Words Have Power*

This truth refers to the power of oaths, declarations, and things we repeat to ourselves and others. If you are always coming up with excuses or negative statements about why something can't happen (I can't get that, I never have enough time/money, etc.), you will come to believe them and block yourself. The same goes for blessings and curses: they may just be words that someone says to us, but we glow when praised and have a tendency to open a door to the worst possibilities when negativity is directed toward us. We give words power when we use, say, hear, repeat, share, or believe them.

In ritual, we speak words to declare our intent, to create sacred space, and to acknowledge spirits and deities. Spellcraft often involves the uttering of words to bring a working together, be it a rhyme, psalm, or prose. Behind those words are ideas: the culmination of history and experience, the focusing of will, the exchange of the sacred and spiritual. The formulation of ideas into words, which are then built into statements, is then followed by action. Magick happens not so much because we say the right words in just the right way under the right conditions, but because behind those words is a desire to bring about change. And if our will is strong enough, we follow through with our statements by making change happen—in ourselves and in the world around us.

Let's go back now to those two initial questions. If your spell didn't work, does that mean you saw absolutely no result or change, or did

it simply not go how you thought it would? Was what you were looking to achieve beyond the realms of possibility? If it worked too well, consider the approach you took and reevaluate what you did. What do you think you could have done differently? Did you foresee this problem happening but ignored the possibility, or were you not paying attention? A failure or success that was a bit more enthusiastic than you were expecting is not a bad thing and doesn't mean you shouldn't do spells. Instead, pay closer attention, exercise critical thinking, and plan more carefully. That's what the series of questions for writing spells earlier in this chapter is designed to help you with. Yes, magick really works, so be smart about how you use it.

## Do I Need a Grimoire or Book of Shadows?

*Grimoire* is a term that has been commonly used to describe the old European esoteric books on magick and ritual, and is derived from the same root word as *grammar*. It evokes an image of a secret treasured book of spells passed down from generation to generation. Another common name is a *Book of Shadows*.[16] This type of book is meant to be a collection of thoughts, dreams, magical and ritual insights and recordings, spellcraft, herbal knowledge, mythological lore, and much more. To create your own book, you don't need to start with a fancy leather-bound book (unless you want to). I recommend buying some sturdy blank books, notebooks, or a decorative binder that you can add blank sheets to. You could also hand-bound your own book, which can be a fun craft to do.

The most common problem that most people have with starting out with a fancy book is the fear of messing it up. The point of having a book is to keep records of what you did, when you did it, and what you did it with. You can collect and scrapbook things you find interesting for future reference as well. If you're worried about making mistakes in your fancy book, then go the plainer route. You can always transcribe things later, if you have the time or interest.

16. For more information on grimoires and Books of Shadows, check out *The Witch's Book of Shadows* by Jason Mankey.

Some people are drawn to keep everything on a computer or portable hard drive. It's fine if you want to type things up on a computer so it's nice and neat, but be sure to print everything out! It is far easier to reference a book than to turn on your computer every time you need to look something up. Plus, a book is something you can pass down in your family, while computer programs and hard drives quickly become obsolete and are far more prone to being erased or damaged. So you can do digital, but back it up with hard copy.

## Lunar and Solar Correspondences for Spellcraft and Ritual

Back in the time section of RITES (chapter 3), we looked at how the lunar cycle can have an effect on our bodies. We can tap into that same tidal ebb and flow with magick and ritual. During a lunar month, we have the new moon, then the crescent moon waxes until it becomes the full moon. Then the crescent moon wanes until the moon is dark (new) again. You could get really specific about the astronomical terms for the different crescents if you want to geek out, but for Witches, we're looking mainly at four different periods of energy. Waxing energy is about growth and expansion, so this is a good time to consider spells and rituals that coordinate with that sense of increase and building up. The full moon represents maximum potential and is considered to be a very powerful time for magical workings of all kinds. The waning crescent brings a sense of release, of decreasing energy, so it's a good time for workings that align with removal, letting go, banishing, and cleansing. The new moon is good for internal workings, conceiving new projects, and exploring the mysteries of the dark.

Many calendars available today note the phases of the moon and sometimes the exact times of astrological events and other occurrences. There are also free and inexpensive applications you can download for your phone for quick and easy reference. Of course, you can always look up to the sky to see what the moon is up to, though that can be difficult if you live in a place that's frequently overcast. There's no harm in having a physical calendar or digital helper to guide you.

I tend to hold to the idea that there are three nights around the full moon for ritual and other workings. These nights correspond to the day before, the day of, and the day after the exact time of the full moon, when the lunar body appears to be full to the naked eye.

We can look to the sun for spellcraft inspiration as well, since we can focus on the lengthening or shortening of days and nights or on the equal-distance points. In fact, most ritual that is done to honor the sabbats tends to recognize the solar patterns of energy by design. Looking at the solar year as waxing or waning can be helpful for spells that are meant to have a slowly building release or time period that corresponds to the path of the sun. If you're looking to accomplish something more quickly, you may want to consider using the shorter lunar month instead. Of course, if a working needs to be done immediately and you find the solar or lunar conditions in conflict with what you need, consider flipping it around. Need to bring in prosperity but the moon is waning? Banish poverty instead, to make room for the prosperity to come. Thinking like a Witch means being creative and looking at both sides of the equation in order to reach a solution.

## The Ritual Arts

In popular misconception land, when the words *Witch* and *ritual* are brought together, people tend to picture mysterious cloaked figures in black gathering by moonlight to draw pentacles made from blood sacrifices to satisfy the appetite of a diabolical and deviant horned beast. Sounds like fun, but the reality is more like someone in their pajamas lighting a candle on their bedroom altar during the full moon and pouring a little wine out to honor their ancestors or gods. (Okay, I don't really wear pajamas to bed unless it's really cold, but you get the idea.) As we will see shortly, ritual can be a very ordinary-appearing thing. Ritual is done more to satisfy our own needs versus anyone or anything else's.

An often misunderstood entity, ritual is often equated with ceremonies that are very involved and complicated, as well as possibly long and intense and maybe even boring. There's a good reason for that: there are a lot of poorly designed rituals out there. Unfortunately, far too

many people confuse "theatrical" with "more is more" and then equate the result with "powerful." Another common problem is using ritual as an excuse to have an audience. Lastly, ritual gets a bad reputation when it becomes obligatory or is done without understanding the reasons or meaning behind it.

At the heart of any ritual is process and pattern, giving the participants a sense of accomplishment and/or acknowledgment. Humans, by nature, are ritualistic beings (not unlike cats). Often without thinking about it, we do certain things every single day or semi-regularly, finding comfort in the repetition. Brushing your teeth, making your morning cup of tea, putting on your favorite necklace, doing your evening meditation practice, cooking your family's favorite meal, going through your emails in a certain way—these tasks may seem ordinary or mundane, but they are little rituals that help to bring meaning and order to our daily lives.

Think about how the day feels when you accidentally sleep in late and have to skip part of your morning pattern, or you forget to do something important because you were distracted. Everything feels out of sorts. When we are able to return to our daily habits, things feel like they fall back into sync.

Then there are the social rituals we do that mark big life events: birthdays, graduations, age-based rites of passage, marriages, wakes and funerals, etc. They celebrate or acknowledge a change in the life cycle and usually are witnessed by family and friends. There is often a lot of attention and energy put into these events because they are seen as significant. John K. Nelson, in chapter 4 of his book *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, provides a wonderful explanation of why ritual is so important to us: "It is believed that the human need for some kind of formal, often public acknowledgment of significant events is one of the fundamental forces of our development as social beings. At the same time, ritual allows us to transcend our individual selves to gain a sense of participation with the greater environment of the forces controlling our singular and communal destinies."

Rituals generally fall into one of the following six categories:

- *Ancestral:* Rituals that honor the deceased
- *Contingent:* Rituals that focus on a personal transition, need, or crisis
- *Devotional:* Rituals that center around the honoring of deities or spirits
- *Divinatory:* Rituals done for divination or revelation
- *Protective:* Rituals designed to ensure health and safety
- *Seasonal:* Rituals that honor a specific moment in the yearly cycle

The bottom line is that ritual has and serves a purpose, whether it's a daily event or a very special occurrence. An effective ritual connects with that purpose and signifies to our brains, bodies, and spirits that something has been accomplished. If the ritual does not elicit that response from us, consciously or subconsciously, it is not successful. When we do complex ritual for the sake of doing complex ritual, without connecting it to a purpose, the ritual will often feel empty or lackluster.

We also have a tendency to default to rituals that have been done before. With ones we have done ourselves, there is comfort in the familiar. A ritual that has been passed down through generations can generate a certain kind of hum or vibration, like a needle settling into a record groove. For rituals that we may not have personally experienced previously but are provided for us in a book or similar context, we hope to plug into that same hum. Sometimes that can work, and in other instances the ritual loses context and meaning over time—or perhaps simply lacked it to begin with. Just because a ritual looks old on paper or is trying to be handed off as such doesn't mean it is that old or effective. Remember, all rituals were new at one point, so age isn't always a reliable factor in whether a ritual will work for you or not. If something doesn't sync up with you, consider creating your own. If you align the right elements in crafting your ritual, you'll discover that even newly created workings can possess that special hum.

So how do you design a good ritual? Some people are really good at doing ritual on the fly and making an improvised ritual feel profound and solid. Other folks meticulously plan out and rehearse their rituals to achieve the same effect. That makes perfect sense because we all learn

and experience things differently—both ways are perfectly legit. How you do it depends largely on your personality type and what you want to see in a ritual. Figuring out what you want (or don't want) is a far better course of action than trying to duplicate something you read in a book once or an example someone else provided. Another key element is determining what kind of energy or focus is needed to accomplish the purpose of your ritual. If you need to perform a healing ritual, that's going to have a different flow than a ritual held to honor the ancestors or to aid in ending an abusive relationship. To give you a better idea of what I mean, here is a thorough list of the purposes of all kinds of ritual and magical workings:

- To collect/gather
- To balance
- To transform
- To cleanse
- To build
- To exchange
- To communicate
- To protect
- To heal
- To start
- To finish
- To uncover/reveal
- To acknowledge
- To celebrate
- To remember/honor

Each of these states feels a bit different because of the actions and thoughts required to achieve the transfer of the energy or ideas. Visualize the root of the action in each, and you will be able to get a good sense of what is needed for your ritual.

In order to plan, prepare, and perform an excellent ritual, there are seven points to consider:

1. *Purpose:* What is the reason for your ritual? Which category does it mainly fall under? There has to be a purpose, or otherwise why are you doing it?
2. *Energy:* What is the nature of the working? What are the goals for how it will flow? Do you need to raise, banish, heal, cleanse, etc.?
3. *Timeline:* What marks the beginning, middle, and end of your ritual? How will the ritual start, what will happen in the middle section, and how will it end?
4. *Persons:* Who is involved in this ritual (the practitioners, the petitioned, and the participants)? Who is being active? What is the role of any "inactive" attendees?
5. *Space:* Where will the ritual take place? Must the space be cleansed or contained in any way?
6. *Preparations:* What is needed for the ritual in terms of materials, lighting, music, timing, etc.?
7. *Afterward:* What additional steps will you need to take after the ritual is complete? What is the aftercare of the ritual?

After addressing these issues, you should be ready to create and hold your ritual. Now, I know a lot of folks worry about doing it "wrong," but the likelihood of something terrible happening is really slim, as long as you use common sense and think ahead. For example, setting a smoky indoor fire close to where your smoke detector is located will no doubt end badly. Doing a skyclad ritual in the middle of winter where the temperature is below freezing is also a bad idea. You're not going to get struck by lightning because you displeased the gods unless you are just being dumb, dancing around with an athame in the middle of a field during a summer thunderstorm. That's not the gods; that's science and nature. (Okay, it may have been the gods a tiny bit … as their way of saying, "Dude, that's just dumb. *Nope*.") Other than those kinds of situations, the best way to learn is through experience, through trial

and error. Keep notes of what worked and what didn't work—and most importantly, listen to your intuition.

Here are some additional tips on constructing healthy ritual:

- Don't take yourself too seriously. Those who are truly confident don't feel the need to overdramatize or demonstrate that point. This attitude allows you to have permission to be more open to what's happening, to be more expressive and communicate more freely.
- Don't be afraid to laugh or make a mistake. The world will not end.
- Do consider what it is that you wish to accomplish and how it can affect not only you but also others, whether they're involved in the ritual or not.
- Remember that less is more. You don't have to overexplain everything, and don't rely on props to get your point across. Make them count, but don't make them the focus. Also, don't assume that longer means better. Ask yourself if everything you're incorporating is truly necessary to accomplish your goal.
- Clean up after yourself, physically and metaphysically.

Keep these simple ideas in mind and you will be on your way to crafting ritual that will work in more ways than you could ever imagine!

## Movement as Magick

A while back, I took stock of the development of Neo-Pagan/P-word culture over the last sixty-plus years and recent trends, fascinated by the swinging of the pendulum. Much of early Neo-Paganism was linked with a renewed exploration of the body and of nature—striving to reconnect with ourselves, embracing the sexual revolution and a new physical consciousness. From an appreciation of the divine feminine/redefined masculine and working skyclad to chemical exploration and new family structures, we explored the body as a temple.

In recent years, I've noticed a shift toward a much greater focus on the mind, from scholarship and related debates to social issues and spiritual consciousness, almost with an intentional disconnect from the physical, the realm of the body. Neither side of the swing is wrong, but there's something to be said about finding the golden mean in the space between them. Balance isn't about always keeping everything exactly even but about consciously knowing when the middle is ideal and when an extreme is best utilized.

This is where understanding the magick of movement comes in. Whether deliberate and precise or made ecstatically while in trance, movement has the power to unite body, mind, and spirit. Movement enables us to unlock parts of ourselves that words and images alone cannot. The electricity that flows between our nerve cells, connecting our brains to the rest of our bodies—it's the ultimate expression of liminality, energy flowing in the space between, touching but not touching. When we take movement into ritual and use it to express ourselves in addition to the words and symbols of the rite, we activate our whole being—body, mind, and spirit. We connect more deeply with our own intentions, and the ability to focus our will becomes easier, faster, and more effective. A person does not need to be a trained dancer or of a certain age, gender, or ability to harness movement and unlock its power.

Sacred dance is not a new concept; it's one of our most ancient arts—but we've lost much of our appreciation of dance and what movement can do for us in terms of ritual and spellwork. Movement has the power to connect us to ourselves and to each other, mind, body, and spirit. I got into dance not long after I formalized my own path as a Witch, and nearly twenty years later I'm still endlessly amazed and inspired by what movement can achieve.

It's not really feasible to teach you movement in this book, so I'm going to recommend instead that you look around locally for something you can do that engages your body. Choose whatever your body and range of mobility will allow you to do, such as yoga, martial arts, social dancing, swimming, working out at the gym, or movement meditation. Even while sitting in a chair you can have a good range of movement that

can help you activate your body in new ways. Check out your local community center, library, etc., as there are often free or inexpensive classes you can try. Then, once you start to get the hang of it, start playing with movement in your work. What kinds of movement evoke the elements? How can you move your arms or legs to gather or dispense energy? Put on some music, turn off your brain, and play. You'll be surprised at how it feels, I promise.

## Creating Sacred Space

Human beings are weird, particular creatures. We as Witches often recognize the world as sacred while at the same time constructing altars and temples and casting circles for the purpose of creating specific "sacred space." If everything is sacred, why would we do that? There are actually several very good reasons, and they involve a lot more nuance than the phrase "making sacred space" implies.

## The Spirit of a Place

If we approach the world from an animistic standpoint, believing that natural objects, beings, places, and the universe itself possess a soul, then spirit is all around us. Layer on top of that perception the *genius loci*, the spirit of a specific location, and the world starts to feel a little crowded. Throughout the world, prior to the religions that preached that "God gave us dominion over Earth to do what we please," people recognized and respected the presence of other spirits. Generally, before starting to erect a structure or clear a road, divination would be performed and the spirits consulted as to whether the building would be acceptable. After construction was completed, further offerings would be made to thank and appease the spirits. You still find practices like this today in Iceland and Slavic regions, where there is rich folklore in both land and house spirits.

Gods and spirits have long had an influence over where things may or may not be built. All over the world, we find temples, monoliths, and shrines that were erected in certain locations to honor the requests of deities and spirits. The folklore of most Native Americans, no matter what tribe they belong to or where they are in North America, contains warnings about places where the people are forbidden to go because

those places belong to the spirits. Then there are places that have layers of sacred heaped on top of them because multiple faiths claim them as special to their religion. Basically it's a game of "Who are the people in your spirithood?" Every place is sacred, but the reasons why can vary drastically.

Then, in addition to the spirit requests, layer in our human brain's desire to compartmentalize everything. We like to designate what is "ours," "theirs," and "mine." Within our own living spaces, we separate them out for specific purposes. We may have a temple room and a room for holding things (aka a junk room/all-purpose room/laundry room). Though they may both be under the same roof, we bestow a sense of sacred importance on one and designate the other as mundane. In our heads, we separate out the activities for each, and feel a different sense of purpose when entering either. We may not say the spirit of one room is different from the other, but in our heads they clearly are distinct energies. In that temple room, the divine feels more accessible, closer to us, than in the laundry room.

## Altars and Shrines

Not all Witches have temple rooms or sacred outdoor circles, but most of us do have an altar (or twelve).[17] The altar is a place of focus, an active workspace that rituals, workshops, and other workings may be centered around. In addition, we may have shrines where we honor deities, ancestors, and other spirits. The altar acts as a focal point for our attention and our practices, connecting us more deeply to the divine without distraction. Altars aid us in communicating with the world around us, seen and unseen.

Various traditions have certain protocol about where an altar should be located and what should go on it. In considering RITES, you probably already have a few ideas of what you think should go on your altar and how you want to use it. An altar should be easy enough for you to access and use but also be placed in a safe location where it won't be disturbed by others. If you plan to light incense or use candles and

17. For more information on altar craft, check out *The Witch's Altar*.

other forms of fire, then make sure the surface and surrounding areas allow you to do that safely, with proper ventilation. Put things on your altar because they have meaning for you and your practice, not because you read somewhere that's what you're "supposed" to have. Your altar should inspire you, but it should be practical and functional as well. Most importantly, follow your intuition—because that's the best direction to follow.

## Sacred Geometry: Casting Circles, Squares, and Spheres

People cast circles for many reasons, and in an even larger variety of ways. Casting a circle can create temporary sacred space wherever you are, almost like having a psychic sleeping bag or tent. If you don't have a somewhat permanent place to do work, casting a circle helps make that temporary space workable for your needs. Many folks cast a circle to act as a container for energy or entities, while others design their circles to keep unwanted energy out (and sometimes for both reasons). Witches may cast circles as a way to get into a certain frame of mind for what they plan on doing. For some people, casting a circle involves great pomp and circumstance, really hauling out the ceremonial magic to call directions, elements, and spirits. At the other end of the spectrum, a circle can be cast simply using the mind and breath, without a word spoken or invoking pentagram made. Some practitioners cast circles only when working with groups and never when they are working by themselves. What you choose to do is up to you and your practice, as each of these ways is perfectly valid.

In my own practice, if and how I cast a circle depends on where I am, who I'm with, and what I'm doing. When I'm working in my studio, I'm in designated sacred space. Just sitting down to my desk, turning on the light, opening the window shade, and having a hot cup of tea ready is all I need. If I'm doing a dance performance, I will use my mind and body to welcome in certain energies and define my space. If I'm doing a ritual with a large group of people, I may lead them through a short process helping them to use their breath, mind, and bodies to welcome elements and spirits. If I'm invited to help facilitate at someone

else's ritual, and they are vocalizing their evocations, I can create something on the spot that is appropriate for their approach.

You can see that each situation has a slightly different approach—I'm not suggesting you use the same method across the board to fit every shape. Speaking of shape, I mentioned geometry in the heading because folks often think about calling in the four directions: north, east, south, and west, usually corresponding with the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water, respectively. This form creates a compass or square shape. The reason we visualize a circle instead of a square is because circles make better energy containers (both inside and out). Things can get stuck in corners, which is why squares and triangles might be used to call in certain entities (rather than a circle). If we add in the concepts of spirit, or above / below, we move from 2-D to 3-D, and our circle becomes a sphere.

One thing to consider about the directions and the elements is that if you travel far enough in any direction, you essentially end up coming from the opposite direction. Also, while elements may be associated with certain directions in a ritual sense, they are ideas that exist in all directions. Directions are often used so we can situate ourselves where we are, putting down temporary roots and flags, if you will. The elements, in turn, help to reunite us with our bodies and the surrounding worlds. You might also wonder what direction you should cast your circle in, if you are going to use the compass model. Clockwise motion, also known as *deosil*, tends to be popular because it is viewed as a direction of increase. Counterclockwise motion, or *widdershins*, is seen as a decreasing or banishing direction. I have long viewed widdershins as marking a departure from normal time and space, so it tends to be my default when casting a circle by movement. Lastly, when casting a circle, any tradition starts with either north or east for the direction, and earth or air for the element. I prefer air because taking a breath is the most tactile, immediate way to remind yourself of your body.

## The Seer: The Witch as Oracle

Powers of divination and prophecy are frequently associated with Witches. From the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece to Spiritualist mediums in Victorian households and tarot readings at the psychic par-

lor down the street, humanity has had a very long obsession with predicting the future. The word divination comes from the Latin *divinare*, meaning "to foresee, to be inspired by a god." That connection to the gods and the realm of the supernatural is largely why these skills are associated with Witchcraft. It's commonly believed that you must be tapping into the divine and touching the liminal to be able to receive such information. Some forms of divination truly are mystical, often requiring the Witch to give part of their mind and body over to the gods or spirits. A shrouded figure sitting on a stool or chair, with incense and smoke flowing around them as they chant or speak prophecies and wisdom: this is such a classic, inspiring image of an oracle or medium. Then there is the naked Witch who, after slathering themselves with flying ointment, leaves their physical body by the hearth fire while their spirit changes form into hare or raven or perhaps catches a ride to the sabbat on the back of a goat or broomstick. The wildest parts of our Witch hearts beat fast at the thought! These iconic examples can truly be amazing and powerful—as well as dangerous—experiences.

But we don't necessarily have to get possessed or inhale, ingest, or come into contact with mind-altering substances to practice divination or inner sight. There are other powers of perception that are linked to being able to observe the world around us with keen eyes.

You don't have to leave your body to engage your intuition and insight. I think much of the Witch's reputation for seeing into the future or speaking startling truths has to do with being connected to what's going on around us. Those six traits of the uncommon Witch that we discussed earlier in this chapter really come in handy for divination. Our skills can be astonishing to others because most people are barely in touch with themselves or the world around them. In a nutshell, they're not paying enough attention and they're failing to connect the threads. In order to look into the future, we must have a solid understanding of the present as well as the past. Again, we return to our metaphor of weaving. How do we know what comes next? Well, we can consider where we are and where we have been, as there are definite clues to be found there.

That said, I find divination extremely useful—even integral—to my practice. I use several different methods, but my favorite is the tarot. As an artist and a myth maker, I strongly connect with the use of images and stories, using metaphor to help guide the way. Also, my partner and I love collecting tarot decks because they're all so different and beautiful. One of my dear friends prefers to use a pendulum instead for her divination work. She likes that it's very simple and straightforward, offering up "yes," "no," and "maybe" rather clearly. Then there are the many varieties of stones, bones, and shells, where the patterns and markings help reveal the answers.

There are literally hundreds of forms of divination to choose from. (The Wikipedia page for divination is an alphabetically listed smorgasbord of methods, if you'd like to lose a few hours looking them all up.[18]) Why are there so many? Humanity has been obsessed with trying to divine the future since we first grasped a linear concept of time. From following snakes to studying wax shapes in water to tea leaves and bones, there are countless techniques that have been developed all over the world.

If you're overwhelmed by all the choices, I suggest referring back to RITES to see if there's a method associated with your roots. Or go to a psychic fair to see what folks are using, peruse an occult shop, or check out some classes, and see what jumps out at you. Don't be afraid to try different methods to see what you like best. As with everything else on this path, divination takes time to master. Once you find a method that interests you, it will still take time to build a relationship with that tool or method—and you will only get better with time!

## A Craft of Your Own

We've touched upon magick, spellcraft, ritual, and divination, all of which can play a different part in your practice. But I would like to make a point of saying that these are not the only ways you can manifest change through your practice. There is no checklist or bingo card you need to fill up to "win" at being a Witch. Some Witches are amazing with growing things and making herbal mixtures, teas, and tinctures. Others excel at hands-on healing, being able to soothe people's minds,

18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methods_of_divination.

or helping people reach clarity. There are Witches who focus on social work, justice, the law, and being advocates for others. There are many different avenues you can take with your practice, so focus on what inspires you and keeps you going.

My main form of working magick is through the visual arts, where I create images of deities and spirits and craft sigils and spell paintings, but obviously I write and dance as well. The nexus of all three is where I find how I can help people the most and explore the world around me. So even if what you think you do best isn't inherently "witchy," I invite you to look at it again from a different angle.

## To Dare to Do the Work

Real change, real witchery, happens down at the roots. The reason you are called to Witchcraft is not to gain power through others but to call upon the power residing within yourself; to grow it and use it to manifest change with your will. We don't make prayers, asking our deities to grant us boons and give us things, to use their power instead of our own. We stand up and take responsibility for our own actions; we make change happen through us. We may ask for their assistance and guidance, but we're the ones in the driver's seat; we're the ones flying the broom. The path we take is up to us.

And it's a scary thing—another one of those dangerous things about Witchcraft. It means you take responsibility; it acknowledges that you do have the power. We're not just talking about metaphysics here either. Down here in the roots, we need to take care of ourselves, and we need to take care of and watch over each other. We need to reach down and secure our position—with determination, compassion, and love—fiercely and strongly. As Witches we must embolden our spirits and minds. We need to reach out to those next to us who are struggling and give them hope and guidance. And then together we all grow upward and outward.

# 5

# Exploring the Liminal and Luminous Numina

*At the Loom:* The sound of threads brushing up against each other in the process of making something larger than themselves. The weight and feel of the fabric against our hands. We sense with more than just our eyes.

*Liminally Minded:* When we step outside the confines of labels and expectations, if we do not respect and honor ourselves, who can we serve or honor? Our understanding of the numina must begin with us.

Now we shall travel from the metaphysical to some even more invisible or incorporeal things. Yes, it's time to talk about deities, spirits, the dead, and possibly other things that go bump in your head. We will explore the liminal realms as well as look at core concepts within the spiritual matrix of the Modern Tradition. In discussing the divine, remember that these are ideas to mull over and form your own opinion of, because your own personal belief system is exactly that. No one can tell you what you should believe. You need to find what works best for you and discover your own mysteries and answers.

## Witches and Liminal Exploration

Ask two Witches what the liminal is, and you'll probably get at least five explanations. The liminal is a state of mind that happens in dream and trance states, the sensation of having a foot in this world and a foot in

the Other, a place where one can travel to interact with gods, spirits, ancestors, and other beings, a folded pocket of space and time accessible in the waking world if you know how to look for it, a gateway between worlds opened up through ritual. The liminal can certainly be different things to different Witches. For each of us, the liminal is a means to give form and words to something that is intuitive, personal, and nearly indescribable.

In this chapter you will read about how *I* experience and work with the unseen world. You may have noticed that we are quite far along in this book and only now am I going to really talk about gods and spirits. There are many books where the first thing you encounter are the gods and how to worship them. As I will soon explain, I don't worship deities, I work with them. They are part of my path, but not the sole reason for it. I'm also not going to wax poetic about flying ointments and traveling outside of my body—most of the work I do requires me to be present in my physical body. Again I stress that these are *my* experiences and views and what has worked for me for decades. Other people believe and see things differently, which is totally cool. I think trying to poke holes in other people's interpretations of the invisible can get rather silly, although there are some ideas out there that, through their propagation, can be harmful to both the practitioner and students, so you may find some underlying levels of snark ahead. I encourage you to think for yourself and draw your own conclusions.

## What Is the Liminal?

I spent every summer of my childhood at the shore. One of my earliest memories is getting up with the sun, standing on the dune in front of the house, and marveling at the way the sun sparkled off the waves, like the water was made of diamonds. Minus the occasional early bird out for a walk, the beach was deserted, so it felt like only the seagulls and I bore witness to this dazzling display. The waves pulled back to reveal treasures of shells and creatures, wet and fresh. The morning ocean was full of promise, before the world woke up and invaded the beach.

Equally amazing were the occasions when the moon was full and the night was clear. The sunbathers had all gone home, so the only

sound was the surf breaking on the cool sand. The moon shone down like a glittering path on the water, beckoning like a siren to come into the water and see where the light would lead you. The ocean at night sang its lullaby while the waves and wind swallowed up the footprints, erasing the evidence of those who had been there during the day.

This pair of events marks a special in-between time, one holding a sense of "before" and the other "after." However, my favorite in-between time at the beach is the gloaming, when the sun has begun to set. An aura of dusk takes over at the place where the land and the water meet. Both the water and the wet sand take on a luminescence that is unearthly.

As you walk along the bubbling breakers and foam, feet sinking into the sand, you get the sense that you are treading inside a giant shell made of mother-of-pearl. The edges of the sky, the ocean, and the beach disappear, and the world becomes a little quieter, hushed even. You become transported to a place that is not a place, outside of time, where earth, water, and air all blur into one. To me, that is the essence of the liminal.

How does the rest of the world define liminal? Merriam-Webster gives us this beautiful tidbit:

> The noun *limen* refers to the point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced, and *liminal* is the adjective used to describe things associated with that point, or threshold, as it is also called. Likewise, the closely related word *subliminal* means "below a threshold"; it can describe something inadequate to produce a sensation or something operating below a threshold of consciousness. Because the sensory threshold is a transitional point where sensations are just beginning to be perceptible, *liminal* acquired two extended meanings. It can mean "barely perceptible" and is now often used to mean "transitional" or "intermediate," as in "the liminal zone between sleep and wakefulness."

So much of the experience of being a Witch and practicing Witchcraft is hard to put into words. However, liminal is one of those words that

gets pretty close to describing much of what we sense. It is a good adjective that captures that sense of there-but-not-quite as a sensation. Applied as a noun, it gives a name to the in-between places we traverse as spirits still connected to the physical realm—while we work with spirits of other realms. What we call those realms has a lot to do with what culture we belong to, what myths we subscribe to, and how we view the invisible and the unknown. But they all find a home in the word liminal.

Modern society tends to view itself as the only reality—unless it wants to get scared and tell ghost stories. But for thousands of years our ancestors have been very much of the mind that there is more to the world than what we can see. In Catholic mythology, there are Heaven, Purgatory, Limbo, and Hell to describe the various places and states a soul could wander through. In Greek mythology, not only is there an underworld but it has at least five sections: Tartarus, the Asphodel Meadows, the Mourning Fields, Elysium, and the Isles of the Blessed. In Vodou practices, Guinee is the spirit world where the souls of the dead live after passing through seven gates. In the Japanese Shinto religion, the land of the dead (or world of darkness) is called Yomi-no-kuni, believed to be physically separate from this reality. In Hebrew scripture, the land where all of the dead go is called She'ol. It is said to be a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and from God. In Norse mythology, there is Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which holds all of the nine realms of existence within its branches and roots. Hindus see the world as divided into three parts: Svarga (the upper regions), Prithvi (Earth) and Patala (the underworld). In Aboriginal beliefs, the Dreaming (or the Dreamtime) encompasses all aspects of life, sacred and secular, physical and spiritual—permeating this reality at times. The Navajo creation story has three underworlds, and it said that we live in the Fourth World, also known as the Glittering World.

Again and again, we see that our ancestors believed in different realms of existence beyond the obvious physical world that we interact with daily. In addition, not only are there separate layers or locations of existence but there are also countless stories and names for the beings that inhabit them: angels, demons, ghosts, djinn, fey, elves, nymphs, Fates, pixies, gnomes, and so on.

From the undead to otherkin, every culture has names, myths, lore, and protocols for beings that are similar to us but aren't us—and aren't quite of our world.

Obviously humanity has given a *lot* of thought to worlds beyond what we can see.

Sure, we could dismiss some things we have explained through science, such as the myths used to explain natural phenomena in the world around us. We know that the seasons are caused by the tilted axis of our round planet spinning in its elliptical orbit around the sun, and not by the goddess Demeter mourning the loss of her daughter Persephone and reviving the world when she returns every spring. But there is much that science has yet to explain, and the scientific method is not necessarily up to the challenge of measuring liminal occurrences. The scientific method is designed for testing things that can happen in controlled, physically bound environments. Any good scientist will tell you there are many things that simply cannot be measured or tested using the method because the conditions surrounding the phenomena are nearly impossible to control consistently. You try getting a deity or spirit to do anything on command. (Okay, ceremonial magicians, you guys hush—and what are you doing reading this book anyway?) There is much we can prove in this world, and then there are the unseen things where the evidence is manifested through generations of human fascination. Sometimes we must put down the beakers and books, close our eyes, and see the divine within. Furthermore, there is something to be said for the emotional and poetic depth of myth that is lost in reducing everything to science. The beauty of imagination, intuition, and art is that through them we can experience the world at a much deeper, more profound level.

## The Spiral Overlay: The Shape of Everything and Gateway to the Divine

I can't say I've ever really sat down and wondered where gods and spirits exist in relation to where we are. Rather, I've always felt that they are part of this world and we are a part of theirs. So while there are many fascinating models out there, with levels and hierarchies of beings trying to map everything out, I haven't felt a connection to any particular

one. If I was going to choose a shape to describe how I feel the universe is made, I would have to select the spiral. From the double helix of DNA, to the numbers of Fibonacci and fractals, to the shape of ferns, flowers, and snail shells, to the looping swirl of a galaxy, the spiral seems to be infinitely present in the makeup of the universe. The spiral moves inward and outward at the same time, connecting points while allowing space in between.

I think the realm of the Other, where deities, spirits, and ancestors reside, is inherently part of this realm, not separate from us and the world we know. Together all the levels of awareness form everything we know. You could picture a chambered nautilus shell, with its successive chambers spiraling inward and outward, interconnected and supporting each other in a carefully balanced system. Perhaps you could imagine a model of the universe where each level of existence or awareness is a different colored spiral, looping around a unifying pole or axis, colors blending as each spiral runs into its neighbor. Or instead of a singular pole like Yggdrasil, the World Tree, consider the structure of DNA: a flexible spiral staircase. Visualize each reality as a ladder rail strung across a pair of spiraling backbones—allowing time and space to be flexible, curving in on itself on occasion, able to be oriented in any direction yet held together by the main frame. If I were going to bet on which design expresses the nature of things, I'd go for this last one. If you unwind and lay out a DNA chain, suddenly there is the structure of a loom before you, containing the information of all of the patterns of the world. Everything in the world—humans, plants, animals, mountains, molecules, gods, ancestors, toasters—simultaneously are the threads of the pattern and the weavers making the pattern.

## Matters of Spirit

So who or what is spirit? If we look at the world through pantheistic and animistic glasses, everything has a spirit to it. But physical form as *we* know it is not a requirement. I have always liked the saying "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Within that statement is the suggestion that

we are spirits that temporarily spend time on the physical plane. Once we become separated from our bodies by death, we very likely continue on. Which means there are spirits that aren't currently encased in amazing meat suits. If we believe that plants and animals and places all have a unique spiritual energy, then there are many kinds of spirits. Not only that, but there are probably many more kinds than those currently connected to the physical realm that we understand and see.

Suddenly we can see explanations for ghosts, ancestral visitations, gods, angels, demons, fey, and other beings of spirit.

I'm going to share with you some of the kinds of spirits I work with and recognize the most: deities, the self divine, and deceased human beings in terms of the Mighty Dead, ancestors, and ghosts. I'll explain them to the best of my current knowledge and experience, and talk about some of the ways I work with them.

## Luminous Numina: Gods

A *numen* is a divine power, spirit, or deity, particularly one that is considered local, immanent, or presiding nearby. (*Numina* is the plural of numen.) There are many ways of viewing the forms that divine power can take and how the numina can relate to us, just under the Pagan umbrella.

Polytheists generally believe that the deities are specific, whole entities, each with their own personality, revealed through myths and personal interaction. Those who are more animistic and pantheistic view gods to be the spirits of ancestors, elemental entities, or the animation of a place or object. Monotheists may recognize a singular numen, with deities seen as archetypes, representations of divinity that we can relate to, or the mythic come to life. Some believe that deities are given sustenance by those who worship them. Others believe the gods to be a facet of the divine source itself in whatever form it chooses to take, impartial to or outside of worship and acknowledgment. People can get really particular to the point of argumentative about their reality of the gods. I believe it's such a personal viewpoint and revelation that the best we can do is share how we see the gods and respect others' perspectives, regardless of whether they agree with us or not.

In my personal practice, I recognize the divine as an energy that pulses through the universe, present in the world around me, including myself. Additionally I have personal and very tactile experiences with deities, so my belief is they can and do have distinct personalities and forms. I also acknowledge that archetypes are an extremely useful way to help the human mind connect with myth and spirit. A god can fit an archetype, yet that doesn't mean that they are two-dimensional, like a cardboard cutout, or that all gods that fall under that archetype are the same. For example, you can classify me as an artist, but that doesn't mean I do the same kind of art as other artists or do only art.

## The Gods Made Us/We Made the Gods

So what *are* gods and where did they come from? Well, the gods may have created us, but also we created them. Both are true. It's my favorite chicken-or-the-egg example. Some sort of energy pushed us all into being, and perhaps some of the gods were the earliest weavers, working that energy into patterns that made the world. They have revealed themselves to us in various ways, and we continually interpret those visions to understand the shape of the divine.

When we look back at history, we start to see parallel myths, with gods emerging, merging, and disappearing. The popularity of certain deities has ebbed and flowed, gods rising and falling with civilizations and religions. A singular divine force may explain how *everything* came into existence somehow (including the gods), but humans have played and continue to play a large role in what the face of deity looks like.

The gods help me connect to the world and understand it better, and guide me on my path. But it's also clearly apparent that they need me (us) as well, whether it's through us feeding them energy through rites, rituals, and other devotional acts, or it's because they require us to do things in the physical world for a variety of reasons. It's a symbiotic relationship, one of give and take and working together. We are responsible for the evolution of the gods through our own hands and minds.

If you pay close attention to Abrahamic mythology, you may have noticed something interesting about the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." Somehow over time this has come

to mean "there is but one god." But no, Yahweh's commandment acknowledges that there are indeed other gods, because he specifically has to say "before Me." He doesn't mention having another god *after* him. Also, the Ten Commandments are said to have come about when the Jews formed a covenant with Yahweh. Basically, they made a contract with that deity. Mythology is filled with people making contracts and agreements with deities. Why would it matter to a god if people gave them specific attention? It matters if the deity gets something out of the exchange—definitely something to think about!

Another thing to consider is that the concept of a singular, all-powerful, all-knowing deity could be compared to a genetic mutation or anomaly. It's not a deeply prevalent or logical idea. Most creation myths involve a cast of many deities stemming from a parental-like being who in turn gives life to other deities and completes their own life cycle. When we compare myths across the world, we see a recurring theme that deities are not all-knowing or powerful. Instead, a deity typically is assigned an area (or areas) of expertise, may collaborate with other deities to solve problems they can't tackle alone, and often exhibit very human-like behaviors. These familiar traits could be because we are made in their image—or that they are made in ours.

*Journal Reflection:* If you come to Witchcraft from some other religion, with the intention to exchange that one out for something that fits you better, you're probably carrying around some baggage about what God is. Now is a great time to explore what you think and feel the divine is, without the constraints of dogma.

## The Evolution of Gods

*It wasn't religious ideas that separated us first but simply survival. When a group of people thrived in a given area (despite or in the face of the weather or illness), eventually there would come a point where the balance between people and resources was in jeopardy, and part of the group would need to splinter off and go to a new area. Being nomadic (migrating with the seasons and animals) was one way to prolong the inevitable, but as we learned to farm and domesticate, more room and resources were needed. In fact, all animals that naturally*

*live in communal organizations—from horses, wolves, and lions to bees, meerkats, and dolphins—hive off to protect resources and stimulate genetic diversity.*

This natural development leads to a crucial fundamental change in how a group experiences the world around them. Imagine that for several generations your people had lived in a certain valley. Over time they became familiar with its landscape, landmarks, flora and fauna, and the natural cycle of its weather patterns. All of these things influence how a person sees the world and how we develop our mythology: where we came from, what is proper protocol, and what we believe.

Then a group heads off over a small mountain ridge in search of more resources. They find a new place to live, but the landscape, the weather, the features, and the animals differ, even if the new location is just a few miles away. Instead of a placid lake for water, they have a mountain spring.

With a higher elevation come different weather cycles, different plants, and different animals, encompassing both new resources as well as new risks. The splintered-off group started with the same mythology as the main group, but there is new protocol to learn and new dangers to fear, and things that were important in the valley aren't so important when compared to the new things they learn in order to survive. Surviving in snow becomes an important life skill, versus negotiating a boggy marsh. The god of the lake may become or be replaced by the goddess of the spring, and the burial rites may change from burying in the ground to "sky" because the harder, often frozen ground won't allow it. Instead, the body is left exposed in such a way that birds, other animals, and the elements can break it down.

So with time, while these people may have come from the same source, their mythology and practices change as their living experience changes to adapt to their environment and its related conditions and factors. No matter what religion you look at, the root idea behind deity is to explain how and why we came to be, how we manage, how we interpret the world around us, and how we look at the future—all of which changes depending on the conditions of the environment we live in, morphing to create new mythology and new gods. The gods create us, and we create them in turn, because nothing is static in this world.

We take our stories, myths, and folklore with us—across mountains, oceans, cities, and space—and through that the gods morph, change, and evolve. So in turn, how we observe, identify, practice, believe in, and work with those gods changes as well.

If you're thinking, "Sure, okay, but that was olden times, thousands of years ago, but *now* that we've established this all, it won't change." Nope! We may not be making the perilous journey of our ancestors into a new landscape with very little knowledge or supplies, but our environment still continues to change and influence our experience. From refugees fleeing disaster to survive and immigrants seeking new opportunities to thrive to the new sprawling suburbia and urban upheaval in our cities due to gentrification, the world continues to change on us. Any time you move up or down the economic ladder or move to a new neighborhood or move back to an old one, your experience changes and influences how you see the world around you. You evolve and grow—and so do your gods.

Problems arise when we fail to see this natural progression. Of course my idea and experience of a particular deity may be quite different from yours, but that doesn't make either idea or practice wrong. In fact, that makes them both even more right, and underlines the utmost need for fostering respect and understanding. The only way you can do it wrong is to insist that someone else's view or relationship with their deity is wrong because it's not your way. The only solution then is to evolve.

### The Gods Must Be Crazy

The eos of eros
La luna, il sol
Harvest's children wed war
The dead cry below

A gold coin for crossing
With blood comes power
A cherub in arms
Fair youth in flower

Et tu brutality, et tu shame
Et tu humanity bathed in pain
Et tu laughter, et tu escaping hope
Confused cacaphony
Flesh formed startdust motes

A pantheon of properties
For Pandora's lid ne'er closed
Altruisms pairs atrocities
The world seems indisposed

And so, Unsurprised prophets
read their shifting visions hazy
Uniting in conclusion
The gods, they must be crazy

—Nathaniel Johnstone, "The Gods Must Be Crazy,"
spoken word poem from *The Antikythera Mechanism*

A popular commentary on deity I often see polytheists making centers on how the gods aren't nice. The basis of the discussion is in the "realness" of the gods, and that they aren't all sugar and spice, made of just pretty statues and paper cutouts, waiting to grant our wishes and desires. There tends to be an underlying message that fear and devotion are important, required duties—and that clearly others aren't seeing or knowing the gods as clearly or correctly as they are.

As someone who spent ten years in Catholic school and whose mother taught religion, while also having a Jewish father, my education included fairly intense theological discussions and a keen interest in the Old Testament. Add to that a lifelong passion for mythology from around the world: Egypt, Babylon, India, Native American cultures, Greece, etc. From the repeated theme of the Bible that "my God is a vengeful jealous god" to the entire collection of Greek and Roman myths (which I like to dub "gods behaving badly"), we have a long history of recognizing that the gods are beings that invoke fear, awe, and

respect, often simultaneously. I think few people who believe in gods would diverge much from that thought process.

Whether you view myths of deities as a means to explain the mysteries of nature and human existence or have a very real, personal relationship with a divine entity, it's very hard to deceive yourself into ignoring the reality of how the world works. Water gives life but can also flood and drown you. Fire brings warmth but can also burn down homes and ravage the landscape. Earth brings us food but can also yield poison and swallow us whole. Air gives us breath but can also destroy and break us down. Myths from every culture extol the virtues and blessings of the gods, as well as their most foul attributes, which is no surprise when we look at the nature of humanity—our brightest and darkest moments, and everything in between.

If we are modeled after the gods, why would they be different from us in terms of virtues, vices, and personalities? If we all (gods and humans) come from star-stuff, why would we not have other things in common? Whether they exist because of us, we exist because of them, or something in between, we are undeniably linked. There are certainly relationships to be explored, and they will vary from person to person and deity to deity.

I do understand the tendency for a person breaking away from Abrahamic religion to want to embrace an opposite sort of deity, often one that is female, kind, accepting, and understanding. But I think that is a fantasy that is short-lived as we grow to understand our relationship with nature, the divine, and ourselves. We know that a woman isn't just one thing, and that a mother goddess can be fierce and angry, just as a father god can be nurturing, protective, giving, and supportive.

As you journey along your path, if you happen to forge a personal relationship with a divine entity or spirit (or multiple ones), then you will very quickly grow to understand the nature of it—the give and take of energy, the diversity of personality, the blessings and the curses. If we do come into it naively or mistaken, the gods have a tendency to poke us—some gently and others with a bit more force to get our attention and bring us up to speed. The gods function at a different level than us; they can see more of the pattern than we can. It also means that in our

current physical forms, it can be much harder for us to grasp the mysteries they may be trying to show us. Some things are beyond our comprehension simply because of where, when, and how we stand.

Here's another way to look at it. Imagine two friends and a tall tree. One friend is on the ground, and the other lives high up in the tree. Both friends can touch the tree and talk to each other. The friend up in the tree can toss down apples for the one on the ground (hopefully not hitting the person on the ground, unless they mean to...). The friend on the ground might sing for the one up in the tree to let them know they're there. They may also take care of the tree so they know their friend is okay. In the end, the friend up in the tree has a different perspective than the one on the ground. They can see farther away in all directions, but they need the friend on the ground to enact changes that they can't from where they are sitting. The friends are interconnected but not totally dependent on each other.

The gods might not always make sense to us, but there are times when we don't even make sense to ourselves. Understanding comes through time and experience, and even then, none of us (gods, humans, or otherwise) can know everything. The best—and perhaps the most crazy—thing we can do is seek to communicate and learn from the experience.

## Experiencing the Gods

I feel one of the most beautiful things about Witchcraft is having a personal, direct relationship with the divine—in whatever form you envision that. If we want to connect with a deity, we can often reach out directly to connect with them, no matter where we are on our path. There is no need for a middleman. I will openly admit that I have some baggage originating in my Catholic upbringing, despite having some pretty radical/forward-thinking/progressive concepts instilled in me by my parents (and their mixed-religion marriage) and certain Catholic schoolteachers over the years. It mainly involves my hackles getting raised when people insist on dictating about practice and what my relationship to the gods should apparently be.

At a very early age I did not respond well to the idea that only someone else (particularly one endowed with a sacred yet supposedly inactive penis) could talk to God and perform the rites. I got straight As in all of my religion classes and was thoroughly familiar with the entire Bible, but it all still did not make any sort of logical or spiritual sense to me. I felt a deep sense of spiritual longing. For all my appreciation of the rites and stories surrounding Mary, it felt like I was standing in a kiddie pool with barely any water in it trying to cool off while there was a hidden ocean looming nearby.

In my teens, I searched for that ocean, and pretty much fell into it backward—or, perhaps more precisely, it found me. Rather than swallowing me up whole and drowning me, this ocean taught me how to swim in it, showed me how to ebb and flow with it and work with its requests. To clear up the metaphor, that ocean was the gods and spirits I work with, and they instructed me on how to work with them. They continue to reveal, to guide, and to inspire two decades later as I change and the world around me changes.

At the Many Gods West gathering in 2016, I was listening to my friend John Beckett talk about starting community by "putting the gods at the center" of it. In response to what he said, I drew the structure of an atom, with its nucleus and orbiting electrons, in my notebook. I'm not sure if John meant for his idea to be taken so literally. I understood what he was trying to express, but my brain went to another place. In my head, that model put the gods as the nucleus of the atom, and we humans as the electrons circling them. But the more I considered the atom and the gods, I realized that you can't have a functioning atom without all of the parts; they are *all* important. What if *we* are the nucleus and the gods are the electrons keeping us in balance and causing shifts in our awareness? We could argue who is which part, but the end result is that together we make up the atom. How stable it is depends on its orbit and the atoms around it. We must also recognize the divine in others to achieve balance and understanding, and there are many different kinds of atoms out there.

Which brings us to one more parcel of baggage for me: devotion. When I think of "devotion" and "devotional," the image that comes to

mind is of the old Italian women sitting in their solitary pews at my grandparents' church in Philadelphia, reciting the rosary—all together yet all alone, relying on ritual for comfort and peace in the place of their god/s yet separate from them. If we look at the definition of *devotion*, it can be "love, loyalty, or enthusiasm for a person, activity, or cause" as well as "religious worship or observance." I would have to lean toward the first definition if I am to find a personal connection with it because of one primary fact: I don't worship the gods. I am devoted to my partner, but I don't worship him. Similarly, I have an intense and intimate relationship with the gods, but that relationship is not defined by being separate from them or connecting with them only through specific rites. They are ever present, whether I'm in the middle of a ritual or driving to the grocery store. (Talk about backseat drivers!) You can argue semantics, but the meaning in those particular words can't express the relationship for me. And the spirits and gods are sure to let me know if something is or isn't working for them—just as I am in the position to inform them of the same.

This is why I feel the best way to describe my relationship with deities and spirits is that I *experience* them, and they I. The details involved in that experience are defined and set by us mutually. It cannot be judged or determined by anyone else. And as we create the gods, as they create us, each experience is going to be different for every individual. I think that truth is something that everyone should keep in mind as they walk their path.

## Choosing Gods—or Not

"How do you know what gods to choose? Which ones should you work with? How do I pick which gods to follow? What if none of them seem to speak to me? Do I even need gods?" These are questions frequently asked by new practitioners. Another related one would be, "I've found a god/goddess. Now I need to find a goddess/god to go with them."

I understand, I really do. It's a hard thing to figure out if you're coming from a background that lays it all out there: "Worship this dude and none of these other ones—except, well, sometimes you can talk to these special beings." Or maybe you have no religious background whatso-

ever. So you have either an extremely detailed rulebook or the idea that there is no rulebook whatsoever, because WTF are gods? You're acclimating to a new concept: that there are multiple gods out there, or perhaps the oddity that the gods are real and do exist, or that god/gods are much different from what you thought they were. And to make matters worse, there's no definitive book to go by to tell you who, how, and why. Awesome, right??

Oh wait, not awesome. It's confusing and you're probably terrified that you're going to make a mistake. You may have picked up a book that has a long list of deities from all over the planet—or maybe a book that suggests only a couple—that don't really resonate with you.

What's a Witch to do? (Warning! Warning! Heresy/blasphemy ahead!)

You don't need or have to *do* anything where the gods are concerned to get going on your path. Just as you don't have to be in a romantic relationship to be whole or happy, you don't need to have or follow gods to be a Witch. Yes, I just said you don't have to have gods in your practice *and* I'm applying dating advice to deities.

Businesses make a lot of money off us, marketing the idea to us that we can't or shouldn't be alone, that we *must* be in a relationship—that any relationship (good or bad) is better than none. So an awful lot of people go from relationship to relationship without ever stopping to consider what their needs and wants really are. Most critically, they don't get the time to figure out who they are on their own. In order to have a truly healthy relationship, most people need that time and focus to be a good partner—and maintain a healthy state for themselves.

Similarly, if you're bouncing out of a bad relationship with a jerk god,[19] you're going to need some time to figure out what other possibilities are out there. You can explore different myths and concepts, discover there's an amazing variety of deities out there, and find out what does and doesn't work for you—without making some sort of serious commitment right away (if ever).

19. See my blog post "One God, A Multitude of Jerks?" at http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tempest/2017/04/one-god-a-multitude-of-jerks.html.

But how do you know which gods are the right gods for you? It may sound flippant and unhelpful, but you'll know when you find the right match. You'll notice patterns, the repetition of symbols and signs again and again. They may just even sidle up behind you and make the whole room smell like goat, then be a loud backseat driver in your car until you figure it out. (True story.) If you find yourself drawn to certain myths or images, then explore them more deeply. Don't worry that you may miss signs. Gods and spirits know we can be pretty dense at times, which is why they repeat things until we catch on.

*But won't I be offending someone?* Who are you worried about offending? Other Witches? You'll do that without even trying or knowing with some people, and, well, why are you worried about their opinions on your practice? Unless it's a mentor, teacher, or someone you respect, then it's none of their concern what your path is. Worried about offending the gods (that you didn't even know existed or were a thing until recently)? Not every god is a petty, jealous, insecure control freak. Most actually aren't. Again, they know we can be a bit slow on the uptake, and they generally let us know when we're messing up. Less worry, more witching.

*But what if I don't have a perfect binary example of divinity? What if I just have a god or a goddess?* Screw the gender binary. You don't have to have a matron and a patron deity. You can work with just one. You can work with twenty of varying genders. Nor is it your job to pair up random deities from very different pantheons to work together like a divine game of Barbie and Ken. You can certainly work with deities from diverse pantheons, but you don't have to pair them up together to do workings based on some sort of gender-balancing act, especially if it's a deity known to work pretty much by themselves. Hekate doesn't need Thor to help her with anything.

*So if I don't know who my gods are, what do I do?* You can pay your respects to the energies and spirits around you without needing to know specific names. You can honor the divine within yourself and in the world around you. Connecting with yourself and your surroundings is very important—and it can help guide you to where you need to go quicker than anything else. Take the time to contemplate what you

know and believe to be true. Try to allow yourself to take in an experience without overthinking everything. Let go of a strict rulebook, and see who comes to dinner. Just be sure to split the check.

If you feel the need to be a devoted priest of a certain goddess and all of your work will center around her, that's up to you and her. It's your path. I encourage you to look at deity like family: there's the grandmother you love and adore, the sibling you avoid at all costs, and the aunt you keep in touch with a couple times a year. You get involved with them to the degree you feel comfortable, and sometimes you want the company. *Note: Sometimes the company comes unannounced, whether you want them or not.*

I think it's wise to be open to possibilities, and I think that's the beauty of polytheism, pantheism, and animism. I might perform a working with a specific deity, but my next working might be with an animal spirit or focus on plants or a genius loci or just myself. We are all beings in the same universe, so just like in our everyday life, we can largely choose what kind of relationships we would like to have and with whom. My relationship with the world is defined by the whole of it, which includes but is not limited to gods, spirits, dirt, blood, myth, and magick. Our magick starts with us and flows out from there.

## Huffing the Gods

"So they were essentially huffing the gods?" he said, and I nearly fell off our bed laughing. I had been describing a ritual I had attended to my partner, trying to explain why it didn't quite work for me. Most of the time other people's rituals have the same effect. Maybe I'm an incredibly picky Witch. (Okay, there's no "maybe" about that. I *am* very particular about certain things.)

Nor am I hating on other people's rituals, because it's quite clear to me that they're getting something from it. (They must be right, because otherwise why would they keep doing it? Actually, it's best not to ask that.) There's definitely not just one way to do a thing, especially where the gods are concerned. I can appreciate the effort and intent, but far too often, for me it's like being on the other side of a lackluster sexual

experience. Someone got off, but it wasn't me. That's always frustrating and awkward.

But let me back up a bit because you're probably wondering WTF "huffing the gods" means. It's derived from a saying that evolved during one of our cross-country tours. I was really missing our cats back at home, particularly after 1.5 weeks of no contact with any cats on our trip. I posted online that I desperately needed to huff some kittens. People who have cats probably know exactly what I mean, but for those of you lacking felines in your life, cats have this amazing warm smell to them, especially around their head. If you're close to your cats like I am (my cat Sam lays on my chest every night, his face in mine), it's a very comforting aroma that goes along with the wonder of a purring mass of warm fur. (There are also some great spoof pages on kitten huffing that you should google.)

The thing is, if the cat doesn't have a relationship with you, it's not going to be terribly interested in being huffed by you. Many kind people all over this country offered me their cats to huff, and many a cat was not having it (minus a couple of actual kittens who didn't know better, though they still were squirmy about it). The intent was good, but nobody involved was happy about it.

So huffing the gods in a ritual context is essentially trying to get a high through contact with deities, usually without having an intimate familiarity with them and possibly little purpose besides attending to your own needs. But if you don't have an active working relationship with the gods, the experience can be quite a mixed bag for everyone involved. (That includes gods as well as humans.)

For me, working with deities and spirits is an everyday experience. One might even apply the word "casual" to it. As I mentioned before, I don't "worship" gods or consider myself devotional in that context. We work together for our mutual benefit. To call upon them doesn't take any more effort for me than calling or texting someone on the phone (actually less effort than calling because I'm not a big fan of talking on the phone). So in other rituals, the moment they start to welcome X deity, that deity is right there beside me. BOOM! Then as the ritual continues to call upon X deity, that entity is looking at me going, "So what's

up? I'm already here. What are we doing?" And all I do is shrug and go, "I think this is for you?" Deity answers, "It's more for them, but that's okay."

As noted in the previous chapter, there are numerous kinds of rituals: many are extremely simple, daily activities, and others are extravagant rites with much pomp and circumstance. I rarely do the latter, and when I do, it's designed to be a multilayered experience—for the gods, for the participants, for whatever purpose it was designed for. It's not ritual for ritual's sake or because the lunar or solar calendar says so. There should be a clearly defined goal, beyond making what you might view as a scheduled obligatory phone call into a video conference call.

An essential part of being a Witch (IMHO) is understanding that we mingle with the divine on a daily basis. It can be hard to break out of other religious mindsets that make deity separate from us and accessible only on special days, in certain locations, through a chosen few. It's also hard to become intimate with deity when you hold them and divine concepts at arm's length. Again applying the model of dating, it's pretty high-pressure to go on a first date at a super-fancy restaurant all dressed up—that's something that's often more appreciated down the line when there's a special occasion. Think more of a tea or coffee date or going on a ride together but, you know, with Witchcraft.

Practice consensual huffing.

## The Gods Who Come with Us

The following is a snippet of a dream I had. This mix of poetry and prose offers one more insight into the gods that I want to share with you.

It was an indoor-outdoor kind of setting—a large covered atrium with open meeting spaces and big terraced balconies and pathways. It was mainly a college-age crowd, with alumni visiting, doing breakout groups. I was walking through when someone called out, "Hey, let's ask Tempest!"

Hearing my name, I walked over and sat on the table and asked to hear the question.

I listened. Then I lay back on the table, hair sprawling out, and looked up at the sky/ceiling. Then I answered: *"There are the gods of*

*places and the gods of spaces. There are the gods we carry with us and the gods that come with us."*

People nodded.

1. *"The gods of places are the gods that have always been there. They are the elements and elementals, the chthonic, that which has always been. The gods of spaces arrive at a place and create a niche, a space of their own among the gods of places. They are nature that lives, breathes, dies, and is reborn again and again—the trees, the groves, the streams, the ponds."*

   The gentleman who called me over in the first place looked on expectantly.

2. *"The gods we carry with us are the gods we know—the ones whose names we call upon, whose images we see and acknowledge."*

   More nodding. "But the last group? How is that different?"

3. I smiled up at the ceiling. *"The gods that come with us are the ones that know us but are unknown, unknowable, forgotten. They are the ones whose names we do not know, whose faces and images we do not see. They watch and they wait. They are the ones who call to us."*

## The Self Divine

When we view the world as sacred and full of spirit, we acknowledge that we are part of that world, and we too contain spirit. If all things are connected by the divine as the force that binds, then it is a part of all things, including ourselves. This revelation is a major game-changer when it comes to recognizing our place and potential for change in the world.

Many cultures view the human spirit or soul as having three parts: a physical self, an intellectual self, and a spiritual self. The physical self is the part of us that is closely rooted to the earth and concerns itself with all things physical and having to do with survival. I see this energy as residing within the belly and pelvis, nestled like a furry animal dreaming of food and sex. Then there is our intellectual or waking self, who is in command most of the time. The intellectual self is constantly think-

ing, reasoning, emoting, and talking, centered in our chest. Lastly, from our head sprouts the spiritual self, which is intricately connected to the gods, the ancestors. I believe that this spiritual self not only is connected to the gods but is the god aspect of ourselves, the self divine.

All three parts of our soul communicate with each other, relaying important information while we are awake and while we are dreaming. Each part has a different way of expressing itself, from gut instinct to emotional intuition to inner sight. Each plays a vital role in us connecting to the world around us. There have been times throughout history when one or more of the parts have been vilified by religion or intellect. The story of Adam and Eve condemns both intellect and sexuality, blaming them for being the origin of sin. There are academic movements that have dismissed the importance of spirituality. There are many schools of thought that see the spiritual self as the most important part. But the Witch knows that we are most powerful when we combine body, mind, and spirit.

The lesson of the self divine is that we are not separate from gods or spirits, nor are we imperfect in our design or being. We are not innately impure or unclean if we already contain the divine within us, though we *can* prepare ourselves better to work with gods if we so wish. Our bodies and brains are all part of a beautiful system that relays spirit. We can train ourselves to listen better to our triplicate soul. Every person is capable of realizing this connection and utilizing it, like free Wi-Fi, if you will. To argue about who is more pure or deserving to engage the gods makes me extremely wary that the matter has a lot more to do with prejudice than piety.

As I mentioned in the previous sections, you don't need to have, follow, or worship gods to be a Witch. If you are able to acknowledge the divine within you, then you see that you are a part of everything—instead of being separate from or subservient to something. You don't have to have some profound relationship with a god and/or goddess to be an effective Witch, but you should work on having a solid relationship with yourself and your immediate world. That's quite a handful right there to be perfectly honest.

## Familiar Spirits, Guardians, and Guides

There tends to be several schools of thought when it comes to the word *familiar*. One interpretation is that a Witch's familiar is a companion spirit embodied in a physical animal. Another interpretation is that the familiar spirit is the Witch's spirit itself transformed while traveling, taking the form of an animal in this world. A third concept is that a familiar is a companion spirit, guardian, or guide that may occasionally be viewed in the shape of an animal during waking hours but more specifically is seen in the mind's eye or during spirit flight. I see room for all three variations to have worth.

First, Witches are known for having close relationships with animals. I actually can't think of a single Witch I know who isn't an animal lover—and not just pets, but taking care of wildlife, livestock, and insects, and, well, basically being stewards of the earth. When you pay close attention to animals, they notice, and they treat you a bit differently. I have had several very close relationships with animals in my life that I would say were fairly remarkable bonds. All of my cats have managed to avoid stepping on my artwork, even if it's laying all over the floor—regardless of whether it's a painting or a drawing. Now, have any of them aided me specifically in doing Witchcraft? I don't really think that's their purpose for being in my life. The relationship itself is.

Much of the lore surrounding Witches is that they can shapeshift into animals. There are fascinating accounts from trial testimonies where a neighbor would recount the story of wounding a hare, cat, or fox, and the next day the Witch would have her arm or leg bandaged, exactly where the animal was wounded. This correlation was seen as proof of Witchcraft. Many practicing Witches do talk of actively changing themselves into animals while traveling on what they call the astral plane. When we think back to the self divine and our animal self within, there's no reason why that part of ourselves wouldn't see itself as animal. For thousands of years, humanity has looked to animals for inspiration, with modern-day team mascots being just a vestige of that familiarity. In the liminal places of mind and spirit, anything is possible.

The last theory centers around spirit guides and guardians. When anyone talks of spirit guides, I am reminded of something that happened to me when I moved to California and started doing readings full-time at a large metaphysical shop. During a lull, one of the other readers there (there were usually at least four working at any time) said to me, "Tell me about your spirit guide." You know that feeling in a bad dream where you've forgotten to do homework that you didn't even know you had to do? That's what I felt. I didn't have a spirit guide, nor did I know I was "supposed" to have one. I had never sensed that someone else *outside of me* was feeding me information when I did readings. I pick up information from other people, particularly that which they are subconsciously hiding or ignoring—not unlike the dentist who knows whether you've *really* been flossing your teeth, despite what you say! The evidence is there for me to perceive, which is how I know it.

Now, I'm not saying that other people's experience of spirit guides is invalid or wrong—that is *their* experience. My guess is that other people relate to their own self divine in a way where they give it a separate personality from themselves. The human mind is capable of compartmentalizing things in amazing ways to work around itself. But on the other hand, maybe those folks are getting separate aid from other spirits. All I know is that when I consider who is at the helm of my ship, that person is definitely *me*. There is no one in between.

I do talk to deities and sometimes get unsolicited advice from them (that is usually right). But I don't consider them my spirit guides or guardians, and the situations usually involve them specifically, such as ritual or artwork. I do get a sense that some of my ancestors are looking out for me—again, I see the evidence of them being there. With both the deities and the familiar dead, I feel like I'm part of a conversation that involves other people, not unlike the one a family would have around the kitchen table. My grandfather is still talking to and taking care of me the way he did when he was alive. It's just happening on a different plane of being now. These conversations are not a constant chatter, nor are the participants consistent, so again, I don't feel like this is the same as a singular, separate spirit guide.

## The Dead: Ancestors, the Mighty Dead, Ghosts, and More

Some people think of the dead when the season calls for it, usually around Samhain. I'm of the mind that the dead are present in various forms all year round. Some traditions believe that the veils (a metaphor describing the separation between this world and the next—or others) become thinner not just at Samhain but at another time as well. This second instance would be in the time frame of Beltane, which is opposite Samhain on the Wheel of the Year (if you follow that model). That may seem odd, but it's really not if you think about it. Beltane is a time of coupling, fertility, and conception, and a time of birth for many animals. It is a clear sign of the awakening of the earth. Birth and death are mysteries that are deeply intertwined, so entries and exits are essentially linked.

Of course, people aren't generally exiting life at one time of year specifically. But during the fall we are witnessing the encroaching blanket of death as the days get shorter, the trees change colors and shed their leaves, plants finish their cycles, and wildlife prepare for winter.

The kiss of death around us reminds us of our own mortality. This reality in turn summons the memories of those who have passed on before us. Our ancestors typically thought it was a smart idea to remember and appease the dead—to ensure the living wouldn't join the dead sooner than expected. Similarly, in remembering the dead, we comfort ourselves in the thought that we too will be remembered when we pass.

There are many ways of viewing the states the spirit goes through after we die. When we think about the people we know who have recently passed on, they are the Familiar Deceased. The ancestors refer to the people who make up my roots; my blood runs in my veins thanks to them. Then there are the people we don't know but have admired from afar who pass on, as well as the inspiring figures from history. We call these spirits the Mighty Dead to honor their memory and power in our practice. Then there are the spirits of people or other beings we don't know at all but may encounter—ghosts, hauntings, things on the edge of our radar.

Here are some of the ways I work with each of these kinds of spirits.

### *The Familiar Deceased*

Pictures and items pertaining to recently deceased family members can be found on my altars. These are people I am related to, who had an impact on my life, and who I may continue to communicate with. I may ask them for guidance, but I'm not exactly "doing Witchcraft" with them. Many people wonder how family members may feel about what they're doing, especially if there's a difference in faiths/beliefs. I tend to be of the mind that when we die, we get a better grasp on the bigger picture and focus more on what's important, yet it's important to be respectful. For example, I know my grandparents always loved me, no matter what I did in life. I'm pretty damn sure they still feel that way, but I'm not going to invite Pan and Grandmom into the same space (Though I think Pan might like getting spanked with a wooden spoon).

### *The Ancestors*

I have a nightly meditation that acknowledges not only the Familiar Deceased but all the people who have come before me whom I do not know. I don't really know if they're watching out for me, if they care at all to see what has come out of their family trees, or if they've moved on, but I like to give them a nod as a group in my meditation and in group ritual workings.

### *The Mighty Dead*

To me, the Mighty Dead are the relatively recently deceased who may not be related to me or that I didn't know personally while they were living, but I feel a connection to them. I recognize their contributions to my path—through my work, altars, and meditations. I may call upon them to assist in my work, and sometimes I find they show up to help out when I wasn't even aware I needed it. Doreen Valiente would be someone I consider among the Mighty Dead—I never met her, but I cherish her work. I did know Margot Adler, author of *Drawing Down the Moon*, before she passed, and I hold her as well in this category. I didn't get to know her very well, but I honor her memory and her work.

### *Other People's Dead (OPD)*

So there's my collection of dead folks, and then there are other people's dead folks. Years ago, when I read tarot professionally full-time, I ran into them a *lot*. Someone would come in for a psychic reading, and little did they know, they brought company—the disembodied, mostly invisible kind. Sometimes this was really helpful and healing and sometimes it was annoying AF, depending on the person. In that setting, it wasn't like a seance at all because rarely was the client intentionally trying to make contact with that spirit. My job was to read their cards. That's what they were looking for. But surprise! OPD in the house! I consider them just another source of information in the "clair" family.

### *Psychopomp*

A psychopomp is a guide whose job it is to escort souls to the next world. I believe it was in my early teens when my art was first called upon to be of service to the dead. There may have been earlier instances, but the first one I clearly recognized involved being commissioned to make a piece of art for a deceased classmate. Since then I have made death masks, spirit paintings, and memorial portraits, and performed dances, and much more—to help ease and assist both the living and the dead. I didn't set out to do it but rather started to notice the pattern after about a decade or so. It definitely is a sacred task that is incredible and humbling to be a part of.

### *Ghosts and Residual Energy*

I have a lot of thoughts about ghosts and believe there are numerous kinds, probably enough to populate another book. But I want to cover at least the basics here. Most of the places where I've lived have had some sort of paranormal activity, some of it tied to the land, some to the building, some to objects, and some to people. Much of it has been pretty harmonious, and I'm super-glad I didn't have to provide food and litter boxes for all of the ghost cats I've encountered. SO MANY CATS. But I digress. For now, I will focus on two kinds of ghosts: *cognitive ghosts* and *repeaters* (my own terms).

A cognitive ghost is a spirit that is very much aware of its surroundings. It can interact with the space and objects and communicate with people. A cognitive ghost may be highly developed in what it can do, say, and remember, or it could be fixated on one specific issue. It can be seen as a trapped or earthbound spirit—something or someone is holding it to this plane. If we consider the view of a triple-soul, perhaps the cognitive ghost is one part of that soul that's still trying to take care of business.

Some spirits get really excited when someone with abilities comes by. They love to try to make contact around 2:00–3:00 a.m. especially. Across a variety of cultures, midnight through 3:00 a.m. is referred to as the "witching hour," marking the time when spirits, ghosts, demons, and other shady beings are thought to be most active. The reasons for this range from the dark cover of night to the lack of prayers said at that time (with everyone being of chaste will and asleep), circadian rhythms, and the lack of electronic interference. Through ritual, spell, and psychic types of work, a cognitive ghost can be aided in its task or released from its fixation, or at least appeased/redirected for a while. Either way, you must be firm and focused.

Repeaters are something different—they're essentially residual energy. I don't see them as conscious spirits that are able to interact or communicate, or a wayward piece of soul. Rather, I think they're simply echoes of past experiences that we sometimes happen to come across. Like a current or a pattern, if someone does a task enough times, there can be a kind of time loop or imprint made. Repeaters can be unsettling if you encounter them unexpectedly, but rarely do they have any sort of physical effect. They can even be of living people who have managed to etch in a pattern somewhere. But a good cleansing of a home or space can help reduce or remove them, just like fingerprints on glass.

So there are some of the ways I view and work with the dead as part of my practice as a Witch. I don't see the dead as something creepy, spooky, or weird—to me it's just part of life. Lastly, I don't think that working with the dead is necessarily a requisite for being a Witch, or will be something that everyone will experience, but I don't think it's that uncommon either.

## Divine Influences: Dedication, Devotion, and Free Agency

Now that we've looked at a variety of spirits, I want to focus on some other aspects of the divine that relate to Witchcraft and being a Witch. I have mentioned that I don't worship the gods; I work with them. It may be confusing to some when I use the word *priestess* to describe myself. I believe there is a difference between doing service and being a servant.

Many, many years ago, I assumed the title of priestess because I had earned the education-based marks for it, achieved the status position to run a group, produced events, and was a public spokesperson. That's what being a priestess meant back then, to me and to many others.

In more recent years, I have found a new meaning and identity within the word. In workshops, I lead by encouraging students to incorporate what I teach into their own practice. In performance, I demonstrate my practice and create a kind of experience where the audience is an observer and a passive participant. In ritual, the attendees put the theory into actual practice and become active participants in the rite (which explains why I have long eschewed rituals that delegate the attendees to a passive watching position—I want them not only to watch or learn but to *do* as well.). Beyond teaching and performing, I am actively guiding and working with the people to connect them with themselves and the divine—within and without. Priestess is not so much a title as it as an action and a state of being. It's the service and the work that's done *with* and *for* others that defines the word for me. Priestessing can be seen as doing work for the gods, but I believe it's really for the good of humanity. Perhaps these goals are one and the same.

Again, I remind you, this is me. You may feel called directly to be in service to and with a deity or deities in a different way. You can choose to dedicate yourself to working with a certain pantheon or devote yourself entirely to one deity. You could be a free agent, working with whomever you please, or you could decide you're just not going to acknowledge deity at all. I want to stress that you don't *have* to do anything. You can always say no; you can revisit a relationship later if you

feel you're not ready or unsure about something. Your path and your needs are your own.

## Revisiting the Sacred Feminine and Masculine

When I was a young Witchlet, I eagerly embraced everything goddess: all the different archetypes, the powers of procreation and sexuality, the wisdom of the crone. I really didn't want anything to do with any sort of male god. I was so over and done with the patriarchal jealous guy in the sky. The gentle Green Man and the handsome guy with antlers were just quiet figures standing somewhere behind the powerful goddess icon. My art in college was full of vulvas, big bold yonic imagery, fearless naked women embracing and staring down the viewer, the history of the Burning Times, and a whole lot of anger. They wore the heads of horses and lions, hoofed and clawed in turn, with mature female bodies. Veiled and crowned, goddesses danced with snakes and swords. Then a horned god came knocking, bringing an aroma of goat and musk and a wicked sense of humor, followed by an antlered one with piercing eyes and a solemn mouth. They each made an introduction and we got to talking. I saw myself in them, and them in me. I finally saw that I was not contained or defined by one gender or concept, something I had pushed against my entire childhood.

I think it's time we get over gender altogether when it comes to gods, expectations, and interpretations. As my friend Misha says, "Gender is a mess."[20] The thing about masculine and feminine is that they are attributes inherent in *all* human beings (and gods). We nurture, we protect, we fight, we create, we lead, we follow.

Depending on what you read in regard to traditional Witchcraft, you might assume that the goddess or the Witch can either be nature personified as Gaia tortured or a sacred whore of unbridled sexuality and blood. I want to say on behalf of every woman on this planet, sorry, guys, but nope, that's not how it works. Women, Witches, and goddesses are not here to be your long-suffering virgin mothers or personifications of your sexual desire, no matter how wild or revolutionary you think that is. We

20. Visit their blog at http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mishamagdalene.

already covered that ground in the '60s and '70s in much feminist literature and art, so catch up already. Men, likewise, aren't either upstanding old wise men with beards or horny goat-dragon boys. I'm not saying these creatures don't exist. What I'm saying is that *every* being—deity, human, or otherwise—is deeply multifaceted, and recognizing the power within is the real revolution.

I suggest we look at the divine feminine and masculine as parts of ourselves that we need to acknowledge and explore more deeply, regardless of what parts we may have lurking in our pants or genes. If the idea of the sacred whore is what sets you on fire to go shake up your world, great. But explore beyond that idea and perhaps examine why you are drawn to that archetype and what that expresses about your concepts of sex and sexuality. It's time to get out that mirror and take a good look. See what you find in the reflection.

## The Crossroads: Dreams and Trance States

Everybody dreams. Some people dream in full color, others in black and white. Some people remember their dreams and can even control them while they are happening (lucid dreaming). For others, their dreams vanish upon waking, like dew drops evaporated by the sun.

I find that most Witches tend to dream vividly and likewise pay close attention to their dreams. Not every dream is a prophetic dream, but sometimes they can be. I still remember prophetic dreams that I had as a little girl—that have all come to be. Other snippets of dreams rush out of nowhere while I'm out in the waking world, suddenly recalled because of something I'm seeing, hearing, or doing.

I think that dreams are how our brain processes all of the information it takes in during the day, which is a lot more than we are aware of. I also believe that dreams can act as a communication exchange between the various parts of our spirit—our animal self, talking self, and god self all gathering at the crossroads to catch up and share information.

The crossroads can, of course, be a very physical place, where two or more roads meet. That physical zone can also be overlaid by something more metaphysical or mystical, which is why it's a favored place for a lot of workings.

Why is the crossroads so special? Think about it—where those roads meet becomes a place that is not set for any one direction. You can decide to go on a new path, continue on the current one, or turn around. The choice and resulting possible opportunities or calamities are strictly yours to make. This liminal quality is what makes the crossroads a nexus of power. For dream and trance states, the crossroads is an ideal meeting ground for different kinds of spirits and entities. It is the place where our past, present, and future meet. It is a place of choosing, a place of leaving, of making sacrifices and uttering words of faith and promise.

Trance is very similar to dreaming in many ways. There are overlaps in brain activity between trance states and the entirety of the dream cycle.[21] The main difference between dreaming and trance is that we are technically awake throughout trance, even if we feel we've checked out of our bodies for a bit. There are multiple kinds and levels of trance that can be achieved safely through dance, drumming, meditation, breathwork, hypnosis, and repetitive tasks. Chemically induced trance can be more dangerous, especially since it can be difficult to control the strength and amount of the chemical. The body can react poorly to chemicals, bringing on violent side effects, or it can even shut down completely, causing death. Chemicals may seem like a fast and easy way to achieve trance, but they're definitely not the only or the safest way.

The brain can be trained to safely enter a certain level of trance over time, with the right stimuli and atmosphere. We can send ourselves into trance or be guided by others. If you're interested in experimenting with trance, I recommend seeing what activities work best with your brain and body. Start with breath-oriented meditation or guided meditation to see how you react. You may be surprised at how quickly and profoundly you can enter into trance. If your mind needs more help being "quiet," then try dancing or drumming, focusing on steady, repetitive motion.

Similar to the physical benefits of drumming and dancing, sex can help you achieve a trance state, often producing amazing images and visions. Getting your animal self engaged can be a great way to hush your talking self.

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21. For more information on trance, see Chapter 4: Trance Science in *Trance Dancing With the Jinn* by Yasmin Henkesh (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 2016).

## Flying or Immediate Witchcraft

There's something inspiring and breathtaking about the art and mythology surrounding Witches flying to the sabbat. I have long been fascinated with the lore, history, plants, ointment techniques, and rituals involved. I enjoy reading and hearing about others' otherworldly travels, spirit flights, hedge riding, and visions. It seems to be a very popular and integral part of what I'm seeing discussed online and in new books concerning traditional Witchcraft.

Yet much of my actual practice happens during normal waking hours, with the only herbal infusion involved being ye old regular Earl Grey or chai tea. Early on I discovered that my reality is bizarre enough as it is without the aid of altering substances. (I suppose you *could* argue tea and cookies are altering substances.)

Most of the time I'm just going about my day—and I'm receiving, sorting, sifting, and/or sending information in a very mundane (to me) sort of way. I don't need to travel anywhere special (with or without my body) to talk to gods or spirits. I'm not casting circles or invoking deities to accomplish my daily work. Instead I'm just making artwork or designing or writing, and I get the spiritual equivalent of a text message—that I can either engage with or ignore, depending on my schedule. (Oddly enough, I get more communication this way than I do with my actual cell phone or living human beings.)

In comparing notes with a few other long-practicing Witches who are also artists, I've found that this fully present mode of working seems to be typical. Upon reflection, it's not a haphazard thing. Rather, if you have been making art for most of your life, you have trained yourself to enter a kind of receptive yet controlled and very present trance state. Sitting down to make work, the body and brain recognize the task at hand and switch into "art mode." Circumstances allowing, the artist taps into various levels of the conscious and unconscious selves. My guide through these places is myself, the self divine: that which is the thread that connects me with everything. Yet I'm still very much contained within my body, processing the rest of the world around me.

It's hard to call that state sabbatic in terms of recent definitions and trends, nor is it quite ecstatic either, at least to me. For me, the ecstatic

state involves body, mind, and spirit working together outside of the normal experience.

There are certainly times when I use music and dance to reach an ecstatic or active physical trance state. However, I feel it's important to note that I don't enter a trance state in dance just by dancing. Also, it takes a *lot* to get me into a state of pure ecstatic abandonment—which is a good thing considering I need to be fully conscious and reactive in my environment when performing or leading ritual. Not only do I need to be watching out for my physical self, but I also have a responsibility for the other people: the band, the audience, and the attendees if it's a ritual. I have to unlock certain permissions to allow myself to go completely under, but that's not to say I don't have incredible experiences in the liminal trance state.

I recently related this experience to a friend with the following metaphor when it comes to full-on ecstatic trance in rituals: It's just like sex and orgasms. For some people, it takes just the barest touch or suggestion for them to get off, while others require extensive foreplay under just the right conditions.

I'm bringing this up because I want to make it clear that there's more than one way to "fly." Your practice doesn't have to require you to leave your body to get work done or experiment with poisonous plants or humanmade chemicals. In the end, it doesn't matter which method works best for you, as long as you get the necessary work done safely and effectively.

I have been considering what is the best name for this kind of practice/experience. I like the words *incarnate* and *inhabited*, but they both seem more connected by definition to a spirit/deity being present in the body. Which technically is true—our own spirits do inhabit our bodies. But I feel that folks may get too hung up on other spirits being present versus focusing on their own. *Embodied* is another word that's almost there. I use it a lot in describing ritual dance experiences because these are the times when our spirit truly becomes both present and aware of being contained within flesh and blood—and transcending it as well. That seems to be a very special relationship that happens under those circumstances.

So for now I think the best word to describe it is *Immediate* Witchcraft. The definition of immediate is "occurring or done at once; instant." This seems to fit very well with my creative endeavors as well as the state I tend to be in mentally / physically / spiritually for dance. It also perfectly describes much of the nonphysical spellcraft that I do. There are few to no outside needs, tools, or aids required. But there is a catch! Immediate Witchcraft is achieved mainly through years of nonspecific training that builds trust with yourself—so your immediate work is also instinctual and intuitive, nature and nurtured.

But perhaps the most beautiful thing about Immediate Witchcraft—and about being a Witch—is that it's not about reaching a pinnacle or some level of expertise. It's a lifelong journey of growth, learning, and exploring. It's being conscious of time and what is right before you—and behind you. Everything that is immediate is also a momentary conjunction of the past, present, and future. True power comes in waves of grace, in the embrace of the darkness, illuminated.

## Ritual Application: Conversing with the Gods

The following revelation will probably come as a surprise to many folks—but my rituals are largely unplanned in their structure. I'm not just talking about what I do by myself. I have a general idea of what needs to happen, and I leave the rest up to the circumstances.

It's not that I'm lazy or that I don't value structure. Rather, it allows me to craft the ritual in the moment—fluidly taking into consideration the people participating and the location and allowing for divine inspiration to happen. You might chalk it up to decades of experience, but even when I was just starting out, I was most comfortable with being able to listen to what the ritual needed versus following a precise and lengthy script.

I consider this approach essential for working with deity and spirits in the way that I do, especially for rituals like "Hekate at the Crossroads: A Meeting of Mind and Movement" and "Dreaming the Raven: A Morrigan Ritual." These are mostly freeform ritual performances performed at events. My partner, Nathaniel, creates music on the violin (we may have other guest musicians as well), and as a priestess and a dancer, I

bring forth the energy of the specific deity we are working with for that presentation. Any attempts at rigid planning are deflected. In fact, the greatest amount of preparation happens just before the ritual as I get ready. In the two to three hours leading up to the event, I prepare my body through applying makeup and costuming, nourishing and cleansing as the energy determines. I don't have a standard introduction that I print out. Instead, I am inspired to scribble down something new just for that event to be read at some point. Each time we do one of these rituals, the whole of the course of the ritual is similar yet very different.

There are a lot of different names for the phenomenon of having a deity or spirit enter your body: drawing down the moon, invocation, being ridden, aspecting, trance possession, etc. For some it is a symbolic state, something in the realm of theater and play-acting. For others it is a complete and total immersion and a surrender of body and will.

I think that for me personally I would liken it more to a conversation—a kind of divine conference call, if you will, minus the corporate setting. Neither of us is fully in control or dominating, but rather we're actively working through a partnership of mind, body, spirit, word, and action. As a Witch and a priestess, I am fully aware of my body, the room, and others in it. I do not "check out," but I'm also not completely in control. I'm reading the situation and relaying information both ways, most often without a filter, but I do have the power to veto and negotiate words and actions. It's not an act of worship for me but rather the combined intent to use the relationship to manifest shift and change.

The conversation is not rehearsed. The only thing planned about it is that we know when and where it's going to happen. There is physical preparation involved with cleansing and fortifying the body (inside and out) and the adornment and attire. There is the setting of the ritual—physical and metaphysical space, audio and visual presentation. Then the dancing begins.

I suppose you could call it "dancing with the gods" instead of conversing.

I'm not trained in partner-oriented dances, so that doesn't quite compute in my brain. It's also hard to separate when it is the Witch who

is dancing and when it is the Goddess who is moving. But more deeply, dance is a form of communication, and I do consider it as much of a conversation as one with words.

Funnily enough, the whole idea for "Hekate at the Crossroads" started with it being a dance and live music experience only—no words except for discussion afterward. But the first time we did it, the words following the dance flowed back into more ritual and more movement. It took it to the next level. Do I speak for Hekate? Do I speak as Hekate? I think it's more like speaking *with* Hekate, sharing words together.

That propensity to be able to listen, to understand flow and not be chained to a precise structure, allowed the ritual to be enhanced. It became something even more powerful and effective. Every time the ritual has happened since then, it has continued to shift and grow—fitting the needs of the attendees. Some things may be added, while others don't happen that evening, which is all for the best. I feel that if I was focused on maintaining a rigid structure, it would be much harder to listen to the conversation—and respond to it.

Human beings are amazing creatures, but we often get in our own way when we overfocus. We can miss opportunities because we're more worried about following along. Similarly, deities aren't necessarily all-knowing or all-powerful. They have a form and a perspective that are from ours—they can see time, space, and pattern in a much broader way than we can. But it's through and with us that change can be enacted. This is where having a conversation becomes powerful magick—an exchange of ideas and actions that is fresh in the moment yet profound.

The last thing I want to say here is that the conversation isn't exclusive to the Witch and the Goddess. Everyone present at such a ritual is part of the conversation. They have eyes and ears, they have voices, and they have hearts and minds. And we do it all together in shared space, acknowledging our own power and those gathered with us.

The more you listen and consider and quiet the script, the more you are able to receive and be heard yourself—not only in ritual but in spellcraft and your everyday workings as well. Through that conversation your path as a Witch becomes clearer.

## Communing with the Dark

*The Witches were the first ones*
*to walk beyond the safety of the fire.*
—VICTOR ANDERSON

*The Darkness is wildly in love with us.*
—SEAN DONAHUE
(DURING HIS LECTURE AT MANY GODS WEST,
OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON, 2017)

The darkness starts in the liminal place where the fingers of the light can no longer reach. Most folks want to stay close to the proverbial fire for safety, to stay close to what is known. Witches are the ones who wonder about what happens beyond the light—what mysteries does the dark hold? They slink off into its embrace, becoming part of the darkness. There is nothing evil or wrong about the darkness. It is out of the darkness that light itself was born and defined.

Within the womb of darkness, the secrets of life and death are known. Through dream and trance, through ecstatic ritual and speaking to the gods, we start to see in the darkness. The darkness reveals our wildness and our own divinity. We come to know that life cannot exist without death. Modern culture has come to eschew the processes of birth and death, another layer separating us from the world. We fail to live when we cannot honor birth or death. When we give in to fear, we curse ourselves and confuse our paths. When we embrace love, we bless ourselves and the world we live in.

Take time to commune with the darkness. Become still and listen to the silence that is the velvet voice of the dark. Feel the rhythm of your heart beneath your chest, each beat unraveling like a spool of thread from its spindle. Be enveloped by the darkness, hold the thread in your hands, and remember who you are. You are the Witch.

We are both the lock and the key. We are the illuminated and we are the shadow. We do not fear the dark of the wild or the light of the city.

We know ourselves.

# 6
# The Practical Witch

*At the Loom:* Find the rhythm, weave the thread in and out, make a powerful pattern of truth and love.

*Liminally Minded*: The hands we clasp in the darkness are our own, guiding us through the storm.

In this chapter we'll examine the reality of living as a Witch in today's world. Not everything is spellwork and talking with the gods and ancestors. We need to consider our everyday interactions and be conscious of the problems we face when dealing with others. As tempting as it might be to hide in your magical closet, Witches need to be in check with the outside world and others as well. This effort includes networking and interacting with society, practicing good etiquette, thinking about commerce, taking care of business, and addressing our own fears. I've included some personal anecdotes and explorations that I hope will comfort, inform, and inspire you as you travel along your path.

## The Witch and Society

When we defined *Witch* and considered the word's possible origins in chapter 2, we looked at how the Witch has managed to exist in and outside of society simultaneously. Sure, we deal with weird things that most people don't like to think about or acknowledge, but being of a place and not quite belonging to it at the same time definitely makes for a somewhat uneasy existence. As human beings, we instinctively want to be part of a group and to fit in. As Witches, it's hard to feel like we fit in—we tend to see the world through a different lens. But we shouldn't

let that perception make us feel isolated. There are many levels to society, with much greater nuance than "us" versus "them." We have many levels of social circles (not unlike the levels of heaven and hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*): family, work, friends, chosen family. Depending upon our lot in life, personal history, and how people may perceive or feel about us, there will probably be varying levels of approval and disapproval, comfort and discomfort, in each of those circles.

The only time we feel like we're in our element tends to be when we're around other Witches. We feel a sense of familiarity, a sense of home that I have come to affectionately refer to as "my people" or "our people." The expression originated many years ago when I was teaching weekly dance classes. Most of my students were young goths—a really delightful yet quiet, smart group of individuals who were easy to stereotype, with their dark clothing, distinct makeup, spikes, etc. The owner of the studio was worked up over the fact that I had calmly pointed out some nonsense she was trying to get away with. I wasn't about to be bullied or cheated. She came back at me with the bizarre phrase "you and *your* people," thrown like an insult. We all found that uninspired attempt rather hilarious and immediate put the phrase to good use. It's not uncommon even today to hear me announce to a gathering of weird folks, "You, my people!"

There's a sense that even though we Witches may look different from one another, with varying ages and backgrounds, there's something almost magnetic that draws us together. We're able to relax and be comfortable around folks, like we've known them for years, even if we just met for the first time that day. Even if we are socially awkward, feel really shy, are in awe of someone, or are battling anxiety, there's a sense of being home when around other witchy folk. Whether we're meeting in a tent set in a muddy Midwestern field, gathering in a hotel ballroom, or walking down the street together in a strange city, we are able to transform these temporary spaces into something special. It's another way we weave the liminal in our daily lives.

As beautiful as that is, I think it's important to remember that we're not better than anyone else. Everyone has their role, even if it's hard to fathom at times or recognize, which means we need to be considerate

and respectful as a default setting when we're outside of our liminal spaces. Sometimes it can be tempting (and fun) to push boundaries just to get a reaction or to stand out just to cause a stir. A sense of social discomfort can make us behave like teenagers.

Our teenage years tend to be a crazy cycle of desiring attention, wanting to hide, figuring out our bodies, and trying to rock the boat to see how far we can tip it. (Thanks, hormones!) At that age, we're trying to sort ourselves out, to discover who we are and what we're supposed to be. That's what we're told the teenage years are for, as if when we hit "adulthood" we should have all of the answers and know exactly who we are! That mindset is really a crock of shit that's not helpful to anyone.

We—and by "we" I mean everyone—are constantly in a state of flux: learning, growing, shifting, and changing. Nothing is definite, and there are endless possibilities. Ideas can pass us by at one age, and then five years later hit us through the core like the clapper to a bell. All humans have this same potential. We're all spirits lodged inside physical bodies, trying to make sense of the world. Try to remember that when you're out and about. Compassion and understanding are like social butter—they make many situations much easier to get through. Embrace some patience and expand your outlook, and you may be surprised at how much more smoothly everything flows.

## Working Alone vs. Group Work and Networking

As mentioned in chapter 3, the Witch does tend to be somewhat of a loner. It's important to remember that you don't necessarily need anyone or anything else to accomplish your work. However, as I said in the last section, there is something to be said for meeting with like-minded people. Whether it's a festival, a convention, a monthly meetup, an open group ritual, or connecting with folks online, sharing experiences and ideas with others can be incredibly validating and inspiring. It's nice to know you're not alone in how you feel or do a certain thing. Having other people to bounce ideas off of and problem-solve with is also extremely helpful. Sometimes we can get a bit too much in our own heads

and miss out on seeing an effective solution for whatever we're dealing with.

Yet community can be a scary thing. There's the potential for drama, which really should be a nonstarter for any community group, but we're human. It happens. One of the most frustrating things I hear is "Oh yeah, THAT (insert reason of the moment) is why I don't do/get involved in community stuff." But here's the thing, folks: community is what you make of it. Those who show up get to have a say in how things go. If you don't show up, if you don't use your voice, then you really can't complain about things not being the way you'd like them to be. If you don't like the politics or personalities of one group, there are probably others—or you can start your own, in person or online. I'm not going to lie: P-words/Witches tend to attract some extreme personalities and some unbalanced individuals. They can get a lot of attention (which is what some of them crave), but they are not in the majority. They don't have to be a part of your experience. You don't and shouldn't have to tolerate racists, bigots, braggarts, or abusers either.

If you have social anxiety issues, it can be really difficult to muster up the courage to make it out to a thing, and even more so when you don't know what to expect. For that, I recommend bringing a friend, if you have one who is interested. If not, try reaching out to the person in charge and letting them know your concerns. A good organizer will take the time to make sure you feel welcome and introduce you to the other people gathered.

Also, don't be quick to assume that because you live in a conservative area, there's no community. Some of the strongest, best-organized gatherings and groups tend to be in those areas. Why? Because it's even more necessary for like-minded folks to be able to get together in a safe environment. The big cities on the coasts will probably have lots of little groups with sparse or irregular attendance because there's less of an urge to feel part of something. When I moved from Rhode Island to the Bay Area of California, I was astounded to discover that the RI Pagan Pride event that I put on was about the same size (if not bigger) as the Bay Area one that took place in the middle of Golden Gate Park.

Find the right kind of group to engage with that appeals to your interests. There are groups that meet to discuss LGBTQ issues, study groups, organizations that host seasonal rituals that are open to all paths, book clubs, coffee/tea meetups, divination parties, and (one of my favorites) occult drinking groups. Are you looking to meet new friends? Do you want to get involved in putting on rituals or at least attending them? If you want to hone your skills as a rune or tarot reader, then look for a group where folks gather to trade readings in order to practice. Or maybe you just want to socialize with folks and talk about witchy things over a hot beverage or glass of wine.

How do you find such things? Here are some ideas to get you started.

*On the Web*

**www.witchvox.com**—The Witches' Voice has been around forever. This website may not look that fancy, but it's a valuable resource that separates the world by countries and states (where possible) so you can search local groups, find events and classes, locate stores, and more. Witchvox is the first place I go before I visit a new place. Of course, you want to follow up your research by checking out links and making sure groups are still active, shops are still open, and events are still going on. People often forget to cancel or update their listings, so it's best to double-check before heading out the door.

**www.paganpride.org**—The Pagan Pride Project has been around since the late '90s. The website lists all associated Pagan Pride events that are currently happening. Even if you don't identify specifically as Pagan, these events often attract practitioners from a wide array of diverse paths. Pagan Pride Day events typically feature one to two days of workshops and classes, rituals, vendors, and community outreach.

**www.meetup.com**—Meetup is a website that's all about organizing—you guessed it—meetups. You can search groups by topic or distance from you, view the local calendar, etc. "Beliefs" is probably the main heading you'll want to look under in your search.

*Around Town*

Bookstores—Many bookstores (used and new) have community boards. If your local bookstore has a healthy occult/New Age/metaphysical section, that's a pretty good sign that there are more folks about.

CUUPS—Does your town have a Unitarian Universalist church? Then they may have a chapter of CUUPS: the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. In more conservative areas, being based in a church is one way to deal with problematic situations.

Ye Ol' Nouveau Local Witch Shop—Not every occult/witchy shop is on witchvox.com. In fact a lot of the newer shops don't seem quite tapped into that resource yet. Keep an eye out for trendy little shops with crystals, triangle motifs, and lunar cycle patterns, and you might find something interesting!

Cafes and Art/Performance Spaces—Cafes and art spaces are historically known to be liberal spaces where iconoclasts, creative thinkers, and other counterculture folks tend to hang out. Again, check the community boards and calendar of events to see if there are any gatherings happening at the space.

## Regarding Commerce, Money, and Commitment

Folks have a lot of opinions when it comes to mixing money with Witchcraft. There are people who loudly decree, "You shouldn't charge money for the Craft!" and then there are people who make their living on Witchcraft. Is one good and the other bad? Really, money isn't the real question. Money is just a stand-in for the value of time and energy. The majority of us live in a modern economy, which means the barter system doesn't work very well anymore. Ideally I'd be happy to trade someone a painting for the fresh eggs from the chickens they raise or for the services of a car mechanic, but the utilities companies don't take eggs, paintings, or oil changes in exchange for their services. They take dollars or electronic credit, so we need to change those items and services into money.

You paid money for this book (or the person who gave it you or the library did), which helps to compensate me and all of the editors, designers, printers, and distributors for our time and energy (yet one more reason why book piracy is a hex-able offense). Real time, skills, and materials were involved. The same is true for the teaching of Witchcraft and related services. I've seen the argument that public schools are free, but that's not true. Public schools are paid for by property taxes, and the teachers or administration don't work for free, though most of them are not getting paid anywhere near what they deserve. Even if you get an apple seed for free, if you wish to get a tree, you're going to need to invest time and energy into taking care of it. Nothing is truly free—*everything* is an energy exchange.

Now, price and value are another ball of wax. There are definitely people out there looking to make a quick buck or to take advantage of people. There are also overenthusiastic people who don't really know what they're doing. I feel these groups are in the minority, and they tend to vanish pretty quickly once word gets around. Solid teaching, quality products, and valuable insight for a fair price always manage to keep going. True practitioners don't want to take advantage of people, and they may even struggle with pricing their work and services fairly. Regardless, they shouldn't give away what they do "for free," nor is it fair for someone who considers themselves a hobbyist to offer what they're doing "for free." Not only are they discounting their work, but they're devaluing the work of everyone, hobbyists and non-hobbyists alike, in the eyes of the larger market. There are ways of getting better at what you do without bringing it to the marketplace.

If you have a tried-and-true product or service, then you should charge appropriately for it. It doesn't matter if this is your full-time job or you do it on the side—your time, energy, and materials are worth money. Make sure it's a wise investment of your time, because what else could you be accomplishing or enjoying in its stead?

It's really important not to confuse capitalism with commerce. Commerce is the buying, selling, and trading of goods and services. Capitalism in this day and age isn't so much about the free market and equal exchange of goods, services, and energy as it is about winning,

building wealth, and monopolizing the market—often on the backs of others.

I've seen some ludicrous accusations thrown at occult / metaphysical shop owners for being capitalistic. There are definitely some questionable folks out there, but the majority of shop owners in the community are small businesses, often family-run operations. Their goals are to provide materials and services to the community, often offering a place to gather, teach, read, and put on events. Running a physical space costs money for rent or mortgage, taxes, utilities, and fixtures, not to mention stocking it with products that people want and having knowledgeable staff on hand during hours when people want to shop. Nobody is getting rich quick from running a small occult shop. It is an enormous investment and commitment of time and energy to create a physical community resource.

On that note, I would also like to say that if you have the choice of getting something from a local shop or ordering it online for a couple bucks less from a big website marketplace, please go buy that thing from your local store. That difference in change means you're supporting your local community in a multitude of ways. It really helps to keep that space going, especially if you enjoy browsing that shop or attending circles or events there. If your only feasible option is to buy online, then try to buy directly from the artist, publisher, author, manufacturer, etc. If you're short on money but want to help support a local business or your favorite artist, author, or band, then spread the word online and leave reviews for their products. Here, time and energy again take the place of money and can have a positive impact on the folks you're supporting. Thank you!

## A Witch's Guide to Essential Etiquette

*(Originally published in* Llewellyn's 2019 Witches' Companion*)*

Etiquette may seem like an old-fashioned concept to discuss, but being aware of how to interact with others is essential to building a healthy community and developing your own personal practice.

So many people nowadays are introduced to the path of the Witch through books and solitary studies. For the most part, it is a wonderful

thing that this type of information is more accessible than ever. It used to be that you had to find a coven or similar kind of group near you to learn from. But there is a drawback: details regarding interpersonal relationships and interactions are not covered in books, whether introductory or advanced. It can also be difficult to navigate social nuances through online courses. It's so easy to lose the immediacy of human reactions as we make contact in cyberspace.

Another thing to consider is that we're wading through a new age of religious and spiritual structure. Few of the religious paths that folks may originate from give much applicable guidance or structure when it comes to defining clergy, creating spaces, and dealing with issues that are specific to Witchcraft. There is no one holy scripture to dictate moral guidelines, ethics, and professional standards. For example, the Wiccan Rede may be followed by some Wiccans, but it isn't embraced by all varieties of Witches, including myself. There are numerous codes, keys, oaths, and tenets—as many as there are traditions, if not more!

So how does etiquette help us? Whether you look at Witchcraft as a religion, a spiritual path, a vocation, a way of life, a method, a tool, or a mixture of all of these, the practice of etiquette applies to you. Let's consider the definition of the word itself. Google Dictionary tells us that etiquette is "the customary code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group." No matter if we practice alone or in a group, coven, or church, social and professional guidelines help us create standards to hold ourselves to and aid us when working with anyone from any path. Etiquette can be the stars to guide our ships in fair weather, as well as the wind that moves us through difficult situations. It also helps us avoid situations that can be embarrassing or damaging. Or, at the least, it can aid us in recovering gracefully when we do make a mistake—which we are all inclined to do at some point!

The following guidelines are rules of etiquette that I follow and teach to my students. It's not an easy path (another reason why it is often called the crooked path!), but these tips can make your journey smoother and less stressful. They're also good for keeping your broom from being chewed on by the drama llama!

### *Your Word Is Your Worth*

As Witches, we work with a lot of seemingly intangible things, such as spirits, deities, magick, and metaphysics. However, we know they are real from our own experiences. You should likewise consider what you say and what you write as also being real and having an impact. Words contain a lot of power, so they must be used wisely. Be true to your word. If you cannot keep a promise or keep to your word, don't lie. Instead, be direct and considerate. Avoid trying to appease others and making empty commitments when you know you can't follow through. It's better to be upfront and disappoint others at the get-go than to build up deception over time. You'll forge much healthier relationships and have a lot less stress that way.

### *Don't Piss on the Seedlings—They Become Trees*

Value everyone you come across and treat them with respect, whether you know who they are or not. Often, amazing power can come from the most unassuming of packages, especially if given a chance to thrive. Community is built by recognizing the importance of *all* of the generations and cycles. Far too often we make assumptions about people we don't know based on appearance, gender, age, or experience. Dismissing someone as an unimportant "weed," as uninformed or inexperienced, because you're not familiar with them will only get you in trouble down the line. We know as Witches that a lot of important magick can come from sources dismissed as mere weeds. In the garden we know that tending to seedlings with enough patience and care can produce amazing plants. Plus, we all have to start somewhere and we each have our own pace of learning and growth. Practicing mutual respect grows a healthy and diverse forest.

### *Speaking of Trees, They All Can Be Felled*

No one is too tall, too mighty, too strong, too powerful, or impervious. There are always storms and forest fires, disease can come in many forms, and the ground underneath the tree may erode away. Essentially, no one is greater or better than anyone else. Even the seemingly smallest thing can cause something big to crash down. It's important to prac-

tice self-respect, but don't make the mistake of considering yourself more important than anyone or anything else. Trying to garner favor and power by threatening or bullying others is unhealthy and unnecessary—and a waste of energy that could be used instead to do something beneficial. Overestimating your power or pull can also get you in a lot of trouble metaphysically, potentially causing harm to yourself and others mentally, physically, and/or spiritually. Be confident, but practice humility and self-awareness, and you'll have a solid foundation.

### *The Same Plant Can Heal or Harm, Depending on How You Interact with It*

Nothing is entirely "good" or "evil." Some incredibly helpful plants are invasive, while others have poisonous blooms but tasty roots. Some prickly plants provide homes for endangered birds. Keep this same wisdom in mind regarding people. I am friends with a great variety of people, and some of those friends do not get along with others. I hear and acknowledge the differences of opinion and the problems, but I also recognize the strengths and positive attributes too. Just because someone disagrees with you on one topic doesn't make them evil—likewise for the inverse. It's far safer to understand nuances than to decree that everything must be absolute. Cultivating a variety of people in your life who have different backgrounds and ideas is a beautiful thing. It prevents you from becoming ensconced in an echo chamber and breaks the comfortable bubbles we tend to float in. Differing opinions and points of view can stimulate new ideas and perspectives while also honing our problem-solving skills.

However, I'm not saying you have to tolerate people in your life who can be harmful through their words and actions. But it can be very beneficial to familiarize yourself with them peripherally. I have foxglove, nightshade, and hemlock growing naturally in my yard, but only the lavender, rosemary, and mint are allowed inside. Take this same approach with people: identify their nature, recognize their good and bad traits, and work with what is best for your needs. You don't have to drink the poison that others dish out.

### *Don't Poison the Cauldron*

Speaking of beneficial and baneful traits, hold a mirror to yourself, your intentions, and your actions. Are you intentionally causing harm without reason? I'm all for hexing to bring justice, binding to contain a situation, and other forms of what can be considered baneful magick, but attacking others in your community out of spite or for perceived slights—through magick or words—is irresponsible. It may soothe your ego temporarily, but you do reap what you sow. Remember, we're all interconnected on so many levels, and even more so in non-mainstream cultures such as the paths under the Pagan umbrella. We have far more in common than we are different. If you purposefully pour poison into the well you drink from, eventually you will feel the effects.

### *What's Good for the Goose Is What's Good for the Goose*

When someone states "This is how I do things" or "This is how it works for me," that's exactly what they are saying. They are not saying your way is wrong or invalid—unless they are saying precisely that as well. (Example: "This is the way that works, and your way sucks is wrong." That makes that person a jerk, and the validity of their opinion is likely suspect.) The path of the Witch requires developing trust in your intuition and forging your own journey. You are your own pioneer, so your path is going to be unique to your own world. Because there is no one standard to go by, many practitioners fall prey to insecurity, worrying that they might not be doing it right or are missing something vital. It's natural to compare and contrast, but don't create competition or drama where it doesn't exist. It's exhausting to always be on the defensive, and even more so when you don't need to be. You're not sure what someone means? Ask them to clarify, *politely*. Don't read into something that's not there.

### *Follow the Intent*

Similarly, it is wise to watch and be aware of your baggage. If someone verbally missteps with a word or phrase, take a moment to consider what they really are trying to say. Rather than immediately getting defensive, going on the offensive, or being triggered, take a moment

to reflect. What is causing this response in you? Is there something in your past bubbling up, a pattern or a behavior? Communication happens in many ways and at multiple levels, including listening, processing, speaking, nonverbal cues, posture, tone, etc.—much of which can be extremely difficult to suss out online or if someone communicates differently from you. Ask yourself: Do they mean well or did they intend to harm? Is there a better and more productive way to address the issue? Is this the time or place for a teaching moment? Is the situation more conducive to calling in versus calling out? How would you feel if you were in their boots? Lastly, if it's happening online, try to envision having the same experience face to face. (This guideline is courtesy of my dear friend Anaar.)

### *Threefold Literacy*

Witches absorb, think, then act. This behavior should apply to all things, especially the internet. As I mentioned earlier, the Wiccan Rede, and particularly the Rule of Three, isn't part of my path. But I do like the number three and have a guideline centered on it in regard to correspondence. My rule of three is this: Read everything three times before choosing a course of action. Similarly, I read my response three times before entering/sending it. This rule gives you time to absorb and make sure you understand what you're reading, and eliminates most confusing or reactionary elements. It also allows you to beat the sinister demon of the internet: autocorrect.

### *Those Who Show Up Determine the Outcome—There Is No Absentee Ballot in Witchcraft*

It's amazing what people complain about, especially when it comes to events and happenings of a community nature. When there's a problem trying to be solved, I constantly see people saying "That's why I don't do X/participate in the community," and then they fail to present any sort of solution. It's ridiculously easy to criticize, but it's far more difficult to actually get up and do something about the problem. Words that aren't followed up with action lose power. Don't like the way something is run? Volunteer, offer assistance, or bring into existence your own vision

if you dare. Community is created by those who show up. If you're willing to raise your voice and want to see change happen, you should also be prepared to follow through by actively participating and being present to the best of your ability.

So those are nine guidelines to prevent Witch wars, foster community, and create a balanced path of living Witchcraft. We all make mistakes, but we can always try to do better. Be kind to yourself, and extend the same courtesy to others while co-experiencing this beautiful life. Go forth and manifest birches!

## The Witch Is Not a Victim

How should you deal with being hurt—physically, emotionally, or mentally—as a Witch? It's bound to happen at some point. Witch wars are nothing new, and people sure spend a lot of time getting caught up in labels and pissing contests, and not every relationship we enter into is necessarily a healthy one for us. Miscommunications happen, wires get crossed, and feelings get hurt. Even those with the best of intentions can run into messy and/or painful situations. It's part of being human.

From our earliest moments, we are constantly in flux, changing and being changed by the world around us. The journey is rarely smooth or easy—life has a tendency to tumble us around like waves toss shells and rocks against the shore. Often we bounce out of it, bearing more knowledge but also a few bruises. Sometimes we can get fixated on how we've been hurt instead of looking at how we have survived and thrived.

It's good to acknowledge when we have been hurt either physically, emotionally, or spiritually, and take the time to heal. It's healthy to be aware of what we're addicted to, tendencies that can impair our growth, habits that are hard to break, or patterns we weave often unintentionally. It is powerful to take stock of the impact of these things but at the same time to not let ourselves be defined by the effects. It's also important to realize that everyone else is in the same mess, whether they show it or not. This is where compassion comes in, and learning to look beyond our hurts and damages to really see others.

Choose words that inspire and ignite you. You're not damaged, broken, without worth, or a victim, so don't assume those words onto your being. Remember that words have power. Choose words that connect and grow you. Then be more than those words.

You can look around the world and see that everything has gains and losses—plants, animals, civilizations, and landscapes. The mountain grows and it also crumbles. Seas flourish but also dry up. Everything is animated. Everything is connected.

As Witches, it's our job to connect the unseen, to recognize the spirit. The Witch is the one who changes, shifts, weaves, and bends. A Witch is not one moment in time or one instance or event but rather all of the moments spiraled upon each other. We are more than our parts and pieces—we can lose these things, but we don't lose us. We acknowledge and embrace the potential for growth and change. No matter what happens to us, the Witch remains. We can be damaged and at times broken, but we still survive, persist, and overcome. We move forward.

We are the weavers, the creatrixes, the makers, and the changers. We put that aside when we choose to dwell too long on a word that isn't us, that isn't who we are. We deny our power when we do that. Witches are not society's small, frail, flawed idea of perfection; we are nature itself. We are the ferocious, raw beauty that is all the blessings and all of the curses that is life combined.

## Universal Flow: Witches Are Like Jellyfish

Another thing to think about when it comes to dealing with pain and hurt is considering preventive measures that don't stunt or prevent growth. That means figuring out what you can do to protect yourself and get a better sense of how things are flowing—before you actually get caught in the current of things.

I often feel like a jellyfish when I'm moving through various groups of people. Folks may talk a lot about setting up protective wards, shields, grounding, etc., but for me personally, there is an instinctive reflex in dealing with people in general. I would explain it as a gentle buffer that protects while allowing necessary information to filter in. It's nearly always on, dampened pretty much only by alcohol.

Scientifically, jellyfish lack a brain and basic sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose), but they have extremely sensitive nervous systems that allow them to perceive stimuli and react very quickly. Narrowly avoiding the obvious "some Witches also seem to be lacking brains at times" joke, psychic perception and intuition could be compared to how jellyfish get by in the world. Witches often feel and experience things that can't be observed plainly by eyes or ears or explained through rational thought.

Most jellyfish are nearly invisible, imperceptible until you've made physical contact—and sometimes not even then. You might not even know you've encountered one until long after (also a lot like Witches). They're often hidden, not immediately apparent, undetected as they're taking stock of the situation. Of course, there's always the man o' war,[22] who must make a big show out of everything—looking all scary and stingy, getting in everyone's way. Bet you don't know anyone like that. (Note: I think a lot of practicing Witches who work with people and the arts also utilize the same buffer structure, which explains why we occasionally—ahem, frequently—tend to bump awkwardly into each other as we're swimming along.)

Jellyfish utilize the currents of the water to flow into where they need to go, but most are also equipped with an internal propulsion system so they can jet along when they need to. Again, I feel a kinship here, because I find it's easier to flow with the current of the universe and how it's directing me versus against it. But I certainly can and do move when action is necessary. That way I'm not overworking myself, and energy expended is well used for a defined purpose.

I want to take a moment here to distinguish between "cultural current" and "universal current." Going along with social norms, bandwagons, and whatever is easiest isn't what I'm talking about here—that's cultural current. The Witch is historically iconoclastic and countercultural. Universal current is the pattern of how things are unfolding on a larger scale—spiritually, metaphysically, in liminal, unknown and

22. Not technically a jellyfish, but float with me here.

known places. It connects with the perception of things outside of the standard sensory organs.

Where I grew up at the shore, in the summer the warmer currents and storms would deposit a great number of jellyfish onto the beach and fill the waters. There was a myth passed around that the clear jellyfish don't sting, that it's just the ones with the red bits that you have to worry about. Really, all jellyfish are capable of stinging; it just depends on whether you as a being are sensitive to it. You can look at magick or spellcraft the same way. All varieties have punch; they have varying levels of effectiveness and implications—it depends on the practitioner and the situation. The same energy that can be used defensively can also be used to bring home dinner.

There's no big show of it either. The jellyfish sidles up, stings, noms, and heads on its way. And as I mentioned earlier, most folks are none the wiser until later. The same works best for spellcraft: do what you need to do without a lot of fuss or attention.

So like the jellyfish, it's not a bad thing to float on the currents—it can bring you to interesting places. Nor is it a bad thing to protect yourself with the resources that you have available.

## Are You a Good Witch?

"Are you a good Witch?" The question wasn't so much asked as it was barked at me, the producer's voice sharp and demanding. Everything inside of me groaned in response.

I would bet that most of you are familiar with that singsongy question à la *The Wizard of Oz*: "Are you a good Witch or a bad Witch?" Really, I can't think of any situation where that's a fun question to be asked—especially if you're actually a Witch. Sure, there's that whole public-image thing—decades of trying to show we're not scary, evil, or fulfilling other fantasy stereotypes. But that's not what I want to talk about.

Rather, let's talk about personal power versus expectations and the desire to please. Because I'm pretty sure that's how I got into the above situation in the first place. I was dealing with this person because I was trying

to please someone else, despite my gut feeling. It's also a character flaw—or more precisely, an ingrained behavior—that a lot of us fight with.

I love helping people and seeing them happy. I enjoy creating opportunities for others to grow and shine, teaching and expanding knowledge, sharing art. It's pretty much my default mode, and it generally works out well. But sometimes the people-pleaser in me gets me into trouble.

One of the major arcana cards that often comes up for me in tarot readings is the Empress. To me, this card speaks of a woman in a position of power, in charge, able to make things happen for others, to grow. But her flip side is that she has a problem saying no. And when you say yes to too many people, suddenly the Empress is no longer sitting on her throne, and she can't rule effectively. Her attention and time are divided, her power reduced or drained.

Society has long tried to train women to be pleasers: be a good girl, follow directions, don't cause trouble, put others before yourself, don't be selfish, keep the peace. (FYI: I'm not saying society doesn't screw with men either—it definitely does—but I need to speak of my personal experience here.) This attitude becomes so embedded in us that it's nearly instinctual. We try to please our parents, our teachers, our partners, our friends, our bosses and coworkers, and even people we don't know. While that can certainly be very nice—especially for others—we're often doing harm to ourselves. It's great to help and take care of others, but you can't do that if you don't take care of yourself first. Part of taking care of yourself is being mindful of your own power.

This truth applies to mental, physical, spiritual, social, and metaphysical well-being. To maintain a healthy level, you need to make conscious choices about how you use your energy. Yes, you can try to make and bake twenty varieties of cookies all at once, but they'll probably turn out better if you choose to do one to three kinds instead. The same is true for dealing with people.

Before instantly saying yes to things and people, take a moment to ask yourself these questions:

- How much energy will it involve for me to do this? Is it something within my means and wheelhouse, or will it take a lot of extra time, materials, and/or brainpower?
- What are the likely short-term results? How quickly can the thing happen? Will it solve a problem or create more?
- What are the long-term implications? Is this a relationship or behavior I want to foster?
- What are the benefits (for me, for you, for the big picture)?
- Am I considering doing this because it's something I truly feel I want to do, or do I feel obligated?

The reality is that not everyone who asks you for something has your best intentions in mind. They're simply thinking of themselves and their own needs. I'm not saying that's a bad thing or that you should always seek to have an equal exchange of energy. Rather, some people will ask without thinking or considering the consequences—for anyone. Children do that because they don't know better or understand yet. Adults do it because they refuse to think beyond themselves. Helping them is like pouring a glass of fresh water in the ocean versus watering a plant: it's wasteful and pointless.

You can try to be a "good Witch" and help everyone out all the time, or you can shoot for better and give your energy where it counts the most. That might mean saying no—which in turn means disappointing and possibly angering some people. But you need to take care of you, or else you're not going to accomplish much. You need to meet your own expectations first and foremost.

So what was my answer to that infamous question posed by the producer? I said, "I'm an effective Witch."

## Breaking Oaths

I mentioned in the first chapter that I did a major course correction after fifteen years of marriage. It was one of the hardest decisions (if not *the* hardest) I have had to make in my entire life because, as I have said repeatedly throughout this book, words have power. This is something

I believe is a key part of my path as a Witch. I didn't want to be an oath-breaker. I take responsibility for my words and actions.

So that begs the question, When and where is it okay to break a vow?

It depends on the health of the relationship and mutual respect of those vows.

Now, the situation I'm talking about was a marriage, but anything that involves oaths and vows is essentially a kind of relationship—and that applies to plenty of situations in Witchcraft. If you join a coven or similar group, an oath is made. If you enter into a contract with a spirit, you're setting an obligation. If you form an agreement with a deity, you're making a vow. If you make a promise to yourself—yes, even that is a kind of relationship.

True oaths and vows aren't one-sided, either. They go both ways, which is what creates the third entity of the relationship and determines its health. The relationship is a metaphysical suspension bridge between the two parties, and it must be supported equally by both sides in order to work.

Now, that doesn't mean you just drop the whole thing if someone is failing to hold up their side of the agreement. Communication is key—and things tend to break down when it doesn't happen properly. When communication stops or gets blocked, then emergency repairs may be needed to get things moving again—again, just like a "real" bridge. (Note: Just because you can't see it doesn't make it not real. Witches should know that especially.)

But some bridges are beyond repair, even after multiple attempts. Sometimes abuse is masquerading as communication, essentially bombing the bridge. So the bridge must be dismantled, considered, and maybe built again somewhere else.

What are the grounds for this course of action? Here's a checklist:

1. Is the vow something both parties understood completely when making it?
2. Were both parties upholding the vow to the best of their ability?

3. If they were failing to do so, was the issue respectfully addressed so it could be remedied?
4. Following that, were sincere and successful attempts made to make it possible to honor the vow?
5. Is the physical, emotional, mental, and/or spiritual health of either party being compromised either because of the vow or because the lack of adherence to it?

If the answers to these questions are yes, yes, yes, yes, and no, then things are probably pretty good.

If the answers are no, no, no, no, and yes, then there's a serious problem, and most likely there are some solid reasons to dissolve the vow ASAP.

You might ask: Even with a deity? Yes—the myths are full of situations where gods broke oaths or weren't truthful in their actions. (Pomegranate seeds, anyone?) Spirits and deities aren't perfect either. We all are growing, changing, and hopefully learning.

Here's another question that might be asked: What's the difference between an excuse and a solid reason? If you never meant to follow through in the first place or never took it seriously, then the vow was essentially void to begin with. Or if you can't be bothered to keep it in good health because of a lack of interest or just laziness, then that's an excuse. But if your well-being, and sanity are in danger, then it's time to cut ties.

That was the point at which I made the decision. Which was greater, my guilt and angst over breaking a vow or losing my life over an extremely unhealthy relationship? I realized that the other side wasn't keeping their vow true, and hadn't been for a long time. In retrospect, this incredibly hard and painful decision was the best thing I could have ever done on so many levels.

I also don't regret the choices I made that got me into that situation in the first place. I wouldn't be where I am, who I am now.

I would say the most important thing that comes with breaking a vow is making sure you have learned from it, that you make the necessary

changes so that you can make better, healthier vows in the future. Because if you keep falling into a pattern of broken and bad vows, there's a good chance it's probably not the fault of other party, but rather the common factor in all of those vows is you.

## Real Energy, Real Experiences?

"How do I know if what I'm experiencing is for real?" I think a lot of new practitioners ask themselves this question. As you follow this path, there's a good chance that you may experience some unusual things that seem almost fantastical. Being a Witch is not "normal," so what's to say you've not lost touch with reality?

There are some people who are so open-minded that they are open to believing just about anything. Everything they see or experience instantly has a magical reason for being. I find that way of thinking simultaneously beautiful, ungrounded, and terrifying. Imagination is wonderful, and so is having an almost childlike view of the world, but being out of touch with reality can be dangerous to the mind, body, and spirit. This approach to the world can attract negative attention, particularly from people who would take advantage of such folks, as well as subject them to a lot of ridicule. However, some people also subconsciously choose this worldview in order to attract *any* kind of attention, to feel like they are special and different.

I think the majority of Witches recognize the inherent dangers of approaching the world in such a way, so they try to almost aggressively push hard in the opposite direction. It's definitely a less dangerous position socially, especially when you don't want to be perceived as crazy or draw unnecessary attention to yourself. I believe that looking for a "real-world" explanation first for phenomena is a wise choice, yet there's a point where you start to run the risk of digging away at your sense of wonder and doubting your own abilities.

The ideal place to situate yourself is between the two extremes. There is definitely more to this world than what we can see, but there are reasonable explanations for many things that seem extraordinary at first. The deeper into the woods of Witchcraft you journey, the more you start to see the connections and correlations—catching what oth-

ers easily overlook or seem to ignore. Consider this awareness as an affirmation of your abilities. If you keep a journal of your experiences, you'll start to see the pattern forming relatively quickly over time. Yes, your tarot reading for that friend was spot-on, that spell you worked did produce effects quickly, and your intuition was right about avoiding that person. Give credit where credit is due. Again, acknowledging your skills doesn't make you special or deluded; rather, it is simply an indicator that you're on track.

Keep in mind that the average person has a tentative relationship with the unknown—they're both scared and fascinated by ghosts, psychic abilities, and the like. Movies and the media generally present an exaggerated or fantastical view of things that in reality are really subtle or not that flashy/interesting. That's not a judgment—entertainment should be entertaining, and the human mind loves to be taken for a ride. But really, given the right setting, you might be amazed at how many people open up about their paranormal or psychic experiences.

I believe it's healthy to question what you experience. It means your brain is trying to keep things in check and that you have a firm foothold (or more) on this plane. The trick is not to scare or discount yourself either. Sometimes the truth *is* stranger than fiction.

## Troubleshooting and Dealing with Fears

When I polled my students about what they feared most in regard to being Witches, several different themes strongly emerged.[23] I think the most helpful thing about that exercise was that the students were able to see they were not alone in their fears. Far too often we get so deep in our own heads that we think we're the only ones facing a particular issue or hardship, but the opposite of that is where the truth lies—yet another reason why networking with like-minded folks can be incredibly helpful. Now, I know talking about these fears here won't instantly resolve them, but I hope bringing them up and addressing them will be helpful to you.

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23. Primarily in my online study group, comprised of nearly four hundred people from all over the world.

### *The Fear of Not Knowing/Not Being Enough*

This fear truly was the most common one. People expressed their concerns about not knowing as much as they should, that they were doing it wrong or were just not good enough. On the one hand, the desire to learn more, as well as feeling like there is more to learn, is a very healthy thing. If you think you know everything, then you are really out of touch with reality. Witches never stop learning. There's always something to discover, a new viewpoint to explore. Where this fear can really cause damage is when it fosters a relentless sense of insecurity and inadequacy. You can't live in self-doubt and practice Witchcraft confidently. You need to be able to trust in yourself. Cut yourself some slack and try to let go of this fear. There's always room to grow.

### *Discrimination, Persecution, and Judgment*

A fair majority of my students voiced concerns about being persecuted for their beliefs and practices. They feared losing jobs, being denied custody of their children, and/or being ostracized or ridiculed for who they are. This group of fears is really hard to deal with because unlike the previous one, the source of the fear is generally other people. In some situations we're just being extra-cautious, and in others, unfortunately, it's the reality of the society in which we live. There are still a lot of closed-minded, fear-mongering people out there who would rather cause drama than listen. So sadly, sometimes you have to hide what you do and who you are to avoid serious and dangerous consequences. Other times, though, if we stand up for who we are and confidently and concisely educate people about what we do and believe, then we can change things in our favor. Some people are open to learning and forming new opinions with the right information. When the fear revolves around being judged by friends or family, good communication can make a difference with people who are willing to hear and see you. There's no reason to be embarrassed about who you are.

### *Negative Impacts from Spells and Workings*

The next rung down on the fear ladder was messing up with magick or other kinds of workings. By now you have probably noticed the recur-

ring theme of responsibility throughout this book, with me reminding you to consider what you do before you do it. If you practice this kind of mindfulness, you will significantly decrease the number of problems you may accidentally cause.

### *The Void*

This fear involves being worried that no matter what you do, it's all for nothing—that nobody cares, that you're not making a difference, that you have no effect on the world. Really, I don't think this fear applies only to Witches. I'm pretty sure all human beings stare into the void at some point in their lives and wonder if it stares back. We want to know that we've made a mark, that what we did or are doing is worthwhile, that *we* matter. Simply by being alive, you matter. And I don't even have to know who you are, dear beautiful being reading my words right now, to know that you have an impact on this world. Never doubt that.

### *Getting Involved with the Wrong People*

Unfortunately, there are quite a few dubious people out there in the world, and at some point you will brush up against at least a couple of them. I'm sorry to say that sometimes they are really hard to spot until it's too late. There are people who are drawn to Witchcraft and similar paths not because they seek power over themselves but because they crave power over other people. They want to be in charge, to feel powerful and in command of others, and they don't mind abusing people in the process. If someone makes demands on your time, your body, your work, your finances, etc., that don't seem right, then head swiftly in the opposite direction. A solid working group will definitely have a honeymoon period where they get to know a new person and vice versa, so that's to be expected. However, you should be able to interview someone else as much as they interview you. Meet new people and groups in public areas, just like you would for a date. Most importantly, please follow your gut and keep your safety in mind.

### *Going Mainstream*

Every decade or so, Witches get pulled into the limelight and public consciousness. This exposure means new people discover Witchcraft, and some old-timers roll their eyes and clutch their crystals about the "state of the Craft" and it being watered down. Now, there are legitimate fears: information can get watered down when things get popular, and dealing with wannabes can be exhausting. But the hearty and willing do survive and become part of the next generation of Witches. Each generation is going to approach things a bit differently—kind of the point of this book, right? My advice for folks who worry about Witchcraft going mainstream is to be supportive of young folks, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. I, for one, am quite liking the availability of interesting goat, ouija, and other occult-themed clothing.

### *Attracting Malicious Spirits and Other Bad Stuff*

Way back when I first started to teach Witchcraft, I liked to make use of the phrase "Don't conjure up anything you can't get rid of." If you don't know who or what something is, don't call that being into your space. That said, negative spirits and similar kinds of things are not that much different from living jerks you run into every day. If you're having problems in your home or some other place that has attracted something undesirable, cleanse the space, firmly banish anything you don't want, and set up protections where applicable. Repeat as necessary. If you're dealing with mischievous house spirits or the fey, set up offerings. By the way, physically cleaning a space can't hurt either—it often lightens the energy of a place dramatically. There are reasons why there are whole books devoted to it!

If I haven't covered one of your fears in this section, I invite you to take some time to consider what is the root of your fear. Where did the fear come from? Why does it take up space in your mind? What are possible solutions for moving beyond that fear? Is there a way you can safely challenge yourself to get past it? Most especially, please be gentle and kind to yourself, and have patience.

## We Are Aradia

I would like to finish up this chapter with a call to action. Your practice as a Witch not only can affect you but can also stir amazing changes in the world around you that can help others. We have a long, long history of scaring the establishment and protecting and aiding those who need justice and want equality.

As Witches, we naturally seek to connect more deeply with the world. That begins with our own bodies and spirits, and then our homes and the land we live upon. From there our roots expand out into the larger world, tapping into the heart of the planet and the universe itself.

This communication is for the benefit not only of ourselves but of all beings—people, animals, and the environment. We can lend our own voice and power to those who cannot be heard or seen. Witches possess the ability to open the hearts, minds, and spirits of the people who have become disconnected from the earth, others, and themselves. In this way, we are activists, guardians, guides, and stewards of the luminous numina. Witches have a duty to perform that is even more critical now than ever before.

We all have ways and opportunities to change the world around us. You get to choose how, when, and where you will make your impact. Seemingly small actions and words can have just as large of an impact as big ones—sometimes even more so. I encourage you to stand up for what you believe in the way you are best suited. There are many forms of activism, and people at the far ends tend to scream the loudest, telling everyone else how they're doing it wrong. But effective change is often far more subtle, happening on a one-on-one basis, sharing ideas with friends, families, and neighbors. Radicals can make waves, but it takes a steady hand to inspire, build, and guide a boat so that it may weather the actual storm.

Witches working for justice is nothing new. In 1899, American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland released a book on Italian Witchcraft called *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*. It contains all sorts of interesting folklore and spells, but the heart of it is the story of Aradia. A quick summary of the *Gospel* is that the goddess Diana saw that her people

were suffering from tyranny, so she sent her daughter Aradia to Earth to teach them the secrets of Witchcraft so they could defend themselves and rise up:

Tis true indeed that thou a spirit art,
But thou wert born but to become again
A mortal; thou must go to earth below
To be a teacher unto women and men
Who fain would study witchcraft in thy school. [24]

There are many concerns and theories about the source material for the *Gospel*. Regardless of authenticity arguments, Leland's book definitely played a role in the development of modern Witchcraft traditions. It also has a lot of relevance to us today, and can be seen as a foundation for a new story for Modern Traditional Witches. Let's look a little further at the goddess Diana, who in the text gives these instructions to Aradia:

And thou shalt be the first of witches known;
And thou shalt be the first of all i' the world;
And thou shalt teach the art of poisoning,
Of poisoning those who are great lords of all;
Yea, thou shalt make them die in their palaces;
And thou shalt bind the oppressor's soul (with power);
And when ye find a peasant who is rich,
Then ye shall teach the witch, your pupil, how
To ruin all his crops with tempests dire,
With lightning and with thunder (terrible),
And the hall and wind ... [25]

24. Leland, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, chap. 1, p. 4, https://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/aradia/ara03.htm.

25. Ibid.

Pretty heavy-duty stuff, right? Diana is not messing around when it comes to teaching Witches how to bring justice through the use of magick. She's not saying, "Oh, times are tough, but just sit on your hands and pray about it." No, her words mean, "You have the power to change things." Now, in modern times, going around poisoning and killing people and destroying property, etc., is generally frowned upon and will get you jail time. I think it's best to take inspiration from the spirit of the *Gospel*, recognizing our own power and realizing that we don't need a savior or one voice to save us.

We can be Aradia. We *are* Aradia. We need to save ourselves. We need to be the teachers. We need to be the learners and the guides. We need to be the Witches. It's a call to stand up for your beliefs. It's a call to action to build and use your practices to protect and empower everyone who needs it, across traditions, genders, colors, creeds, ages, and abilities. We can revel in and honor diversity *and* bring everyone up together. We can protect the environment, the planet, and each other by illuminating the threads that connect us.

It was largely the text of *Aradia* that inspired the Charge of the Goddess, given form by Doreen Valiente. Pulling from the spirit of Aradia and the path of the Modern Traditional Witch, I wrote a new charge:

### The Charge of the New Aradia

When sense and world have parted ways,
Whenever need is great and dire,
In brightest sun or moon's dark phase,
Bring forth will to light the fire.
Send down the roots, raise up your arms,
Call forth spirit, summon its charms
With wand and cauldron, stang and knife,
With cloak and horn and lore of wife.
Build your wisdom and bide your time
In eyes of heart and blood sweet wine.
In city and wood, gather still
To protect and guide with our will.
Now is the time to heed the call,

Witches together, one and all.
In our truth, we know the power,
That our voice brings down the tower.
To banish, cleanse, bless, heal, and guide
With our secrets and sabbat ride.
It's the hour to change the tides,
For now as Witches we all rise!

I hope this charge inspires you and your practice. Don't forget that you have power. Remember that these are indeed the times we were made for.

# Conclusion

My hope is that this book has inspired you to actively weave your own pattern. As you continue forth, may the tools within guide you to create, craft, and maintain a practice that becomes your own Modern Traditional approach to Witchcraft. There will be times when you may lose your grip on the thread you're weaving or feel like the pattern has gone astray. Remember that you are not alone. You are following in the footsteps of countless generations of liminal weavers, and you are surrounded by spirit in so many ways. Breathe, close your eyes, find the quietude of the darkness. Soon the light of the star will become visible like the rising sun, the fabric will be illuminated again, and you will find your place.

There is much work to be done on the winding path ahead, but I think you will find it both refreshing, rewarding, and fulfilling. Blessings to you!

# Acknowledgments

I can't believe I've written three other books already, and number four is the first one I remembered to put this part in (derp!). Despite that oversight, I hope *all* of the wonderful folks at Llewellyn Worldwide know that I think they're the bee's knees. Much love especially to Elysia Gallo, who not only has great taste in alcohol, fashion, music, and cats but is an awesome person, fabulous editor, and wonderful spirit. Special thanks to Kat Sanborn for being an enthusiastic publicist (and somewhat of an enabler lol). Much appreciation to editor Andrea Neff for really helping to push me to be a better author when it comes to the final edits. And of course much thanks to Lynne, Shira, and the rest of the art department for bringing my work to life.

My deepest gratitude to Robert Mathiesen for being a guiding force and inspiration when I was but a burgeoning Witchlet—and who even now seems to enjoy it when I throw random occult questions his way. He helped to confirm some of my hunches along the way, especially the section I've infamously dubbed "angel penis."

In writing this book, I had to dig pretty deep back into my college years and everything else that happened in my life at that time. So much of what I still carry with me came from lessons I learned from the teachers of my big three freshman foundation courses from my first semester at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design):

From Thomas Mills (*Drawing*): *The most beautiful mark you can make happens after many attempts of drawing and erasing, building up layers of experience while really learning to see your subject.*

From Ed Oates *(3-D Design): Sure, you could do it the normal way, but what fun would that be? Turn it upside down, challenge yourself to see and build differently. At least try it, otherwise you'll never know. Is it soup yet?*

From Wendy Seller *(2-D Design): Colors are best explored by what we lay next to them and how far we can take them from their origin. We copy the work of the masters to learn their techniques and get a glimpse of what they saw. From there it's up to us to find our own style and vision.*

To all of my students across the world, regardless of the workshop, class, or study group, thank you for sharing your time, energy, and thoughts with me. I hope that I have illuminated your path as much as you have mine.

Last but not least, I am so grateful for the amazing people who have come into my life in the last decade. Dance, art, and Witch folk near and far, I am blessed with beautiful beings who truly enrich my life—with wine, whiskey, whimsy, whiskers, and Witchcraft. I love you all.

# Resources

The following is a small sampling of books from my own library that I like to recommend to my students. This list is by no means exhaustive, nor is every book perfect. Information can go out of date (and fashion). My suggestion is to try a little of everything and see what resonates with you.

## Books on the History and Folklore of Witchcraft

*Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* by Charles G. Leland
*Doreen Valiente: Witch* by Philip Heselton
*Drawing Down the Moon* by Margot Adler
*The Element Encyclopedia of Witchcraft* by Judika Illes
*The Rebirth of Witchcraft* by Doreen Valiente
*The Night Battles* by Carlo Ginzburg
*The Triumph of the Moon* by Ronald Hutton

## Books About Modern Witchcraft, Spells, Tools, and Magick

*The Black Toad* by Gemma Gary
*Italian Folk Magic: Rue's Kitchen Witchery* by Mary-Grace Fahrun
*The Element Encyclopedia of 5,000 Spells* by Judika Illes
*Keepers of the Flame* by Morganna Davies and Aradia Lynch
*Natural Magic* by Doreen Valiente
*Sigil Witchery: A Witch's Guide to Crafting Magick Symbols* by Laura Tempest Zakroff
*Under the Witching Tree* by Corinne Boyer
*The Witch's Altar* by Jason Mankey and Laura Tempest Zakroff

*The Witches' Almanac* (a yearly publication)
*The Witch's Book of Shadows* by Jason Mankey
*The Witch's Cauldron* by Laura Tempest Zakroff
*Witchcraft for Tomorrow* by Doreen Valiente

## Books on Gods and Spirits

*Goddesses in World Mythology* by Martha Ann and Dorothy Myers Imel
*The Return of the Dead* by Claude Lecouteux
*The Tradition of Household Spirits* by Claude Lecouteux
*The Witch's Book of Spirits* by Devin Hunter
*The Witches' God* by Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar
*The Witches' Goddess* by Janet Farrar and Stewart Farrar

## Inspirational Reading Starters from the Fiction Aisle

*American Gods* by Neil Gaiman
*Griffin and Sabine* by Nick Bantock
*Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins
*Juniper* by Monica Furlong
*Moonheart* by Charles de Lint

You can also visit my blog *A Modern Traditional Witch* at Patheos (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tempest), which is where I post regularly. If you're reading this far off in the future, as long as the internet is still a thing, my blog is probably available in archive format for you to read.

## To Write to the Author

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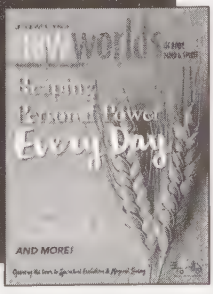

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